SPEED

SEPTEMBER 15¢

WESTERN

STORIES

A SPEED MAGAZINE

COPPERHEAD

by James C. Lynch

How to Avoid these "BOOBY TRAPS" in your home!

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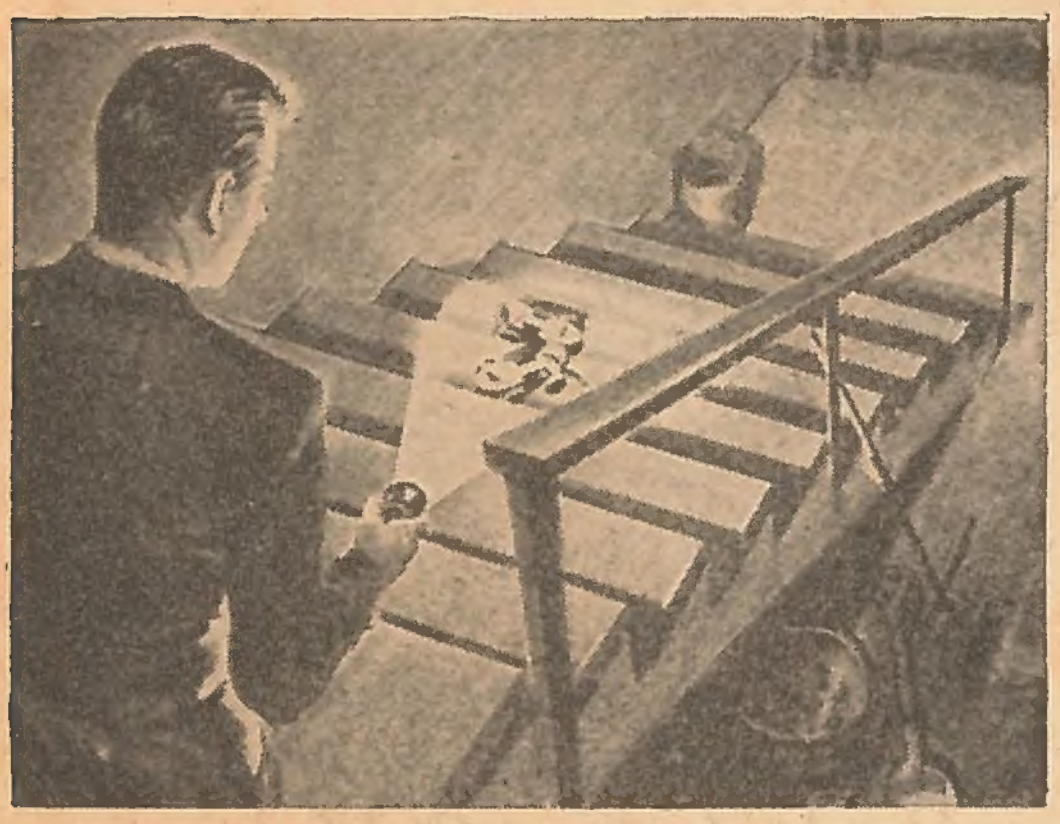
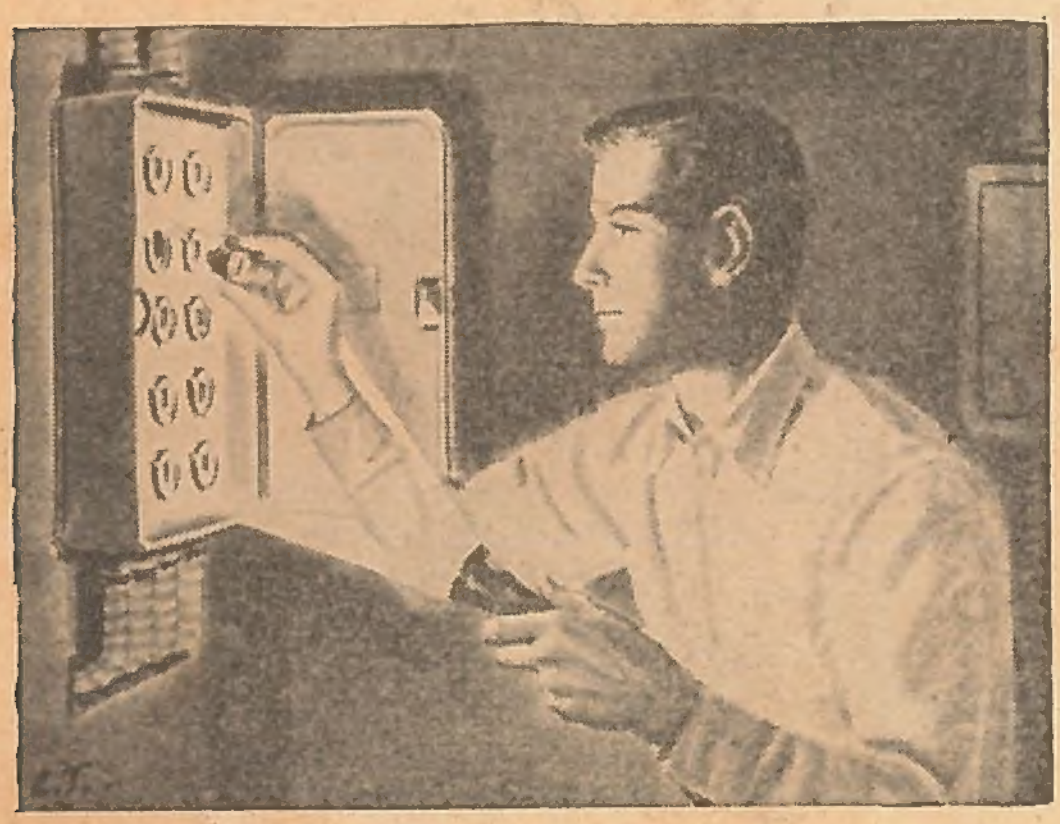


1 About 5,000,000 Americans are injured every year *at home*—33,500 fatally! Largest single cause: *falling*. A roller skate on a dark staircase; shin-catching obstructions; slippery objects: these can be lethal "booby traps." To avoid them, carry your "Eveready" flashlight in dark areas.

2 Be sure all obstacles are cleared away. Linoleum or carpeting should be tacked down firmly. In attic or basement, pack all loose objects in noninflammable boxes stored against the walls. Don't rely on *your* knowledge of where obstacles are located—the next person may not know.



3 Know *in advance* where your fuse box, main water and gas valves, etc., are located; be sure you have a clear path to them. Armed with your "Eveready" flashlight, you can approach without fumbling in an emergency. Be sure loose wires are so placed that you won't trip over them.

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SPEED • WESTERN • STORIES

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THE REEL WEST

By TIM DERRIN

MAN FROM RAINBOW VALLEY (Republic Pictures). ***With Monte Hale, Adrian Booth, Jo Ann Marlow, Ferris Taylor, Bud Geary, Keene Duncan, Emmett Lynn, and The Sagebrush Serenaders.***

Here we have a good fast Western with an unusual, ingenious plot—all filmed in color. Monte Hale (played, as it happens, by Monte Hale) is the creator of a popular comic strip featuring Outlaw, the Wild Horse—and is the owner of Outlaw's real life model, a magnificent animal that is the pride of Monte's Rainbow Ranch. An unscrupulous rodeo promoter (Ferris Taylor) steals the fire-eating Outlaw for use as a show horse, since the sleepy broncs he has are causing the cash customers to yawn. The promoter's ravishing niece (Adrian Booth), who at first did her crooked bit in the horse-rustling scheme, comes to regret it after winning Monte's trust. Monte uses the same sort of trickery she used on him and foxes the promoter into a bet that he, Monte, can break Outlaw at the rodeo—Monte to get the nag if he wins. The promoter then employs foul play—and Monte is indeed in a tight. You'll be on the edge of your Bijou seat at the bang-up ending. All these entertaining goings-on are further enlivened by a fine musical score that includes Roy Rogers' "The Man in the Moon Is a Cowhand."

This is the second starring vehicle for Monte Hale. The six-foot-three Texan was spotted by the movies while warbling and guitar-playing at a Stars Over Texas bond rally and shortly thereafter was featured in several cow operas before achieving stardom with "Home on the Range."

NIGHT TRAIN TO MEMPHIS (Republic Pictures). ***With Roy Acuff and His Smoky Mountain Boys, Allan Lane, Adele Mara, Irving Bacon, Joseph Crehan, Emma Dunn, and Roy Barcroft.***

This diverting Western, filled with action and the melodies of the celebrated Smoky Mountain Boys, had an iron-horse background. Young, hotheaded Dan Acuff (Allan Lane) returns to his home town of Tranquility from a stretch in stir, filled with bitterness against railroads since he is convinced that a stationmaster framed him. The town is invaded by a railroad president (Joseph Crehan) posing as a wealthy fisherman in order to deceive the villagers into selling cheaply land over which he secretly plans to extend his rails. Dan learns what's cooking and, with his brother Roy (played, as another coincidence, by Roy Acuff), sets about to defeat the rascal. The explosive complications embrace much satisfactory brawling, with fists and lead, and the railroader's tasty daughter (Adele Mara) is prettily mixed up in the melee. We were delighted by every foot of the roaring narrative and recommend it sans reservations.

Roy Acuff and His Smoky Mountain Boys are held to be the foremost singers of mountain music in America. Born and raised in Tennessee, Roy early learned the songs of the mountain folk and how to play the guitar and fiddle. His band is a unique musical organization in that he employs only real mountain boys who have been familiar with their special brand of music since childhood. His greatest ambition is to gather and preserve for future generations the folk music of the Southern mountain people.

Allan Lane was a triple-threat athlete at Notre Dame. He left the University to play pro baseball; made several films in Hollywood; returned East to play pro football with the Brooklyn Dodgers; eventually signed a new movie contract and has now appeared in over fifty pictures.

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COPPERHEAD

Ben Hoffman fired. Death whispered at Case and went on to smash savagely at bottles and glasses on the bar.

Illustrated
by
Joseph Sokoli

By JAMES CHARLES LYNCH

THE Limited bore westward into the gusty storm. Wind tore the smoke off at the engine stack and hurled it back along the rocking coaches. Sheets of rain slanted at the windows, prying at crack and crevice to get inside and meeting with enough success to raise a damp smell from the red-plush seats.

Case Yewing, sitting alone in the third coach, turned his face from the scene ahead of him to stare out through the rain-streaked window. The prairie grass lay flat and sodden, bending eastward. Frowning, Case glanced up the coach again, filled with the annoying illusion the bent blades pointed that way for his benefit. Warning him back.

The girl, facing him up ahead, looked at him again. In repose, her face was beautiful, finely shaped. Her lips looked

What kind of cunning, ruthless death game of freeze-out were these mighty men of the smelters pulling on a whole vast Western copper empire? For several quite varied personal reasons, Case Yewing decided to find out—even knowing the hazards of bucking vulturelike greed, treachery, and the power against him

firm and warm and inviting to a man and her eyes had been startling grey. They were nearly black now, black with anger; and her lips were turned down in disgust.

One of the two men across the aisle had leaned toward her again, talking softly. The girl kept looking at Case, showing him her anger, but asking no help. Boldly, the man leaned far over and reached out to caress the back of her hand lying in her lap.

Something besides anger flickered in those darkened grey eyes. Case stood up and moved into the aisle, his long black coat, hanging loosely on his shouders, blocked the narrow passageway. He paused to fasten one button at his waist,

a tall, narrow-hipped man, loosely built, but with a manner of seeming rooted to the ground.

The man leaning across the aisle turned back into his seat to let Case pass. Case stopped beside him, put a hard grip on the man's shoulder and bent low.

"You're getting too bold, friend," he said. "I'd like it better if you paid more attention to your own business and less to the lady across the aisle." Case tightened his hard grip to emphasize his words, but the man did not seem to notice it. He turned his face up to Case, showing him a pair of black eyes as unreadable as beads. He took in Case Yewing's coat and vest and fine white shirt.

"How do you know she's a lady, dude? Your private property, is she?"

"You can think that if it will make it easier for you," said Case.

The man's companion, a small man with straw hair and round, unblinking eyes, deliberately unbuttoned his coat, showing Case the big gun stuck in his belt. "Beat it," the little man said.

Case shook the hard shoulder again. "Don't forget what I said. And you might tell the little man the yarn about the boy who played with matches. Thanks for your time."

Case returned to his seat. The girl's eyes were grey again. A stray wisp of rich brown hair curled down over her ear and Case thought of the pleasure it would be to tuck that wisp of hair in place and hear her laugh and watch the warm blood color her cheeks.

BUT such softness had no place in him. He turned his thoughts to smelters belching their sulphurous smoke. Of great, deep caverns in the earth, where men toiled dangerously. Of raw towns, where rich mansions looked down on squalid tents and a day's luck raised a man from a begged breakfast to a supper of quail on toast with champagne to wash it down. Where the roar of a gun in a dark alley or the quick wit of a Wall Street broker changed men's fortunes with equal suddenness.

The rain eased and stopped and a late sun broke through to raise steam from the sodden prairie ground. The grass still pointed east. Up ahead, the engine whistle shrieked one long blast and the train began to slow. A brakeman came through the car and Case stirred himself.

"Would this be Smeltertown coming up?"

"No," the brakeman said. "The storm made us late and we have to take the Buffalo Siding to let the eastbound pass. We'll be here about ten minutes, if you want to stretch your legs."

The trucks squealed and bucked, the coach shuddered, then the train stood still. Through the window, Case saw the red-painted telegraph and signal tower a hundred feet ahead. Heads bobbed beneath his window as passengers began to quit the stuffy coaches.

The pair opposite the girl did not move. The girl stood up, hesitated, then moved down the aisle. Case saw her appear next beside the train. She turned her head fleetingly toward his window, then moved toward the telegraph tower. She walked easily over the uneven ground, betraying her lack of corseting by her grace. Case breathed a little faster.

He still watched her when the two men came into his line of vision. They paused and stretched and sauntered carelessly after the girl. The man Case had spoken to was tall with the full body of a man who used too much food. But he was hard and tough. The little man walked a step behind him and to the right.

The girl saw them, took a half step back toward the coach, then turned, moving slowly toward the telegraph tower and turning the far corner. Case knew she would circle the place and come back, eliminating the need of meeting the pair face to face. The big man quickened his step. When he came to the tower he waved his hand and they moved around the tower the opposite way.

Case rose, hurrying, but the pair were already out of sight when he quit the coach steps. When he rounded the corner of the tower, the little man was waiting. The eastbound train was roaring up, whistling for a clear board and Case

barely heard him say, "We thought you'd butt in, dude." The little man's gun came down, arcing in a full-arm swing.

Case flung his left hand up. The dropping gun-barrel hit his arm and slid along, half turning the little man aside. Case hit him in the mouth. Before going on, he wrenched the gun from the little man's unconscious fingers and threw it far out into the prairie grass..

Case circled the next corner. The eastbound was abreast now, its thunder covering the crunch of his boots on the gravel walk.

The girl was backed against the wall. The tall man stood facing her, his arms out, his palms flat against the building, holding her.

"No use putting on those high-and-mighty airs for me, honey," he was saying. "I know your type. And you can forget that dude in the black coat."

"No," said Case. "Your dog barked before he tried to bite."

The man turned. Case hit him, driving him back, pinning him, stunned, against the siding of the shack. Case drove in another blow. Gagging and bleeding, the man collapsed, rolling over on his face.

The girl looked down at him and Case appreciated the fact that the violence and blood did not frighten her. She said, "Your punishment was pretty severe. I don't think he would have gone any further than talk."

"I don't like short drinks and mild tobacco," said Case. "You better get back on the train. They're calling 'all aboard'."

She looked at him, drawing in a long breath and letting it sigh out of her. Then she lifted her long skirts slightly and turned away around the corner of the building.

Case knelt beside the unconscious man and opened his coat. A big gun jutted from a holster under the fellow's arm. Case sent the weapon sailing after the one he had taken from the little man.

There was a long envelope hanging half out of the man's inner coat pocket. Case drew it out. It was plain white and thin, addressed to:

Alexander P. Marks,
President,
Amalgamated Central Syndicate,
Smeltertown.

Case straightened, stood there a moment, staring down at the bleeding man. On the siding, the westbound was whistling, starting to move. Case slipped the sealed envelope into his own pocket and set his long legs in motion.

HE CAUGHT the flashing handles of his car and swung aboard. The girl stood in the vestibule, waiting. Case brushed past her, went to the seat the pair had occupied, jerked two valises from the baggage rack and hurried back to the steps. The telegraph operator was standing beside the tracks. Case tossed the two bags toward him.

"For two gentlemen who decided to stop over here!" he yelled.

The operator stared at him and Case hung there, looking back until the train cleared the siding and gathered speed on the mainline. No one come from behind the shack to make a run for the train. Case turned back into the car.

The girl was back in her seat. When Case came down the aisle, she moved closer against the window and brushed the folds of her dress from the seat so that a man could have room to sit there if he wanted to. Case hesitated, then went on to his own chair. He had all a strong man's hunger in him, but he wanted nothing less than a feast. No smelling the hot bread with his nose against a bakery window and a belt pulled tight over an empty belly. He'd had enough of that.

Brooding, Case kept his face turned to his window. The light faded. The upthrust land ahead turned purple, disappeared. A trainman came through, lighting lamps. Case glanced up the car, his eyes widening.

A man stood in the shadows of the vestibule. A grey man, his toil-bent figure hung with raveled clothes. He held Case Yewing's glance, motioned slightly with his head and disappeared into the washroom.

Case took a long stogie from his pocket, stuck it between his teeth, rose and sauntered down the aisle. Turning into the washroom, he closed the door and lay his back against it. The grey man sat on the cushioned seat, his bony wrists dangling hopelessly between his knees.

"Ed Hall," said Case. "When did you get on this train?"

"Couple hundred miles back," said Ed. "I traveled as far as I could to head you off. Then, when I caught your train, I got selfish again. It's funny what the promise of money will do to a man." He looked up at Case. "But I couldn't go through with it, son. I want you to turn back and get your job back. We ain't digging ore in Copperhead no more. Only graves."

Case brought up a match and touched the stogie, letting the strong smoke wreathe his face. "As bad as that, eh?"

The grey man nodded. "Amalgamated Central has made us an offer for our claims. Twenty-five thousand dollars apiece. We refused, so the accidents started to happen. A bucket of ore poured itself down Joe Swager's shaft. It didn't kill Joe, but he won't work for a year. A man daren't show a light in his house at night. A light makes a good target for a man with a rifle. I guess twenty-five thousand is a lot of money, at that."

Case rubbed his back against the door. "How much are you worth? What's your surveys show?"

"Near as we can tell from borings and what we can see, there's thirty million

Tossing the two bags toward the telegraph operator, Case yelled: "For two gents who decided to stop over here!"

dollars' worth of ore in our ten claims. But it ain't good unless we can smelt it. Amalgamated controls the works at Smeltertown. They claim they're loaded and can't take our ore. We can't get ahead enough to build a plant and the investors we can get to are afraid of Amalgamated. My idea was, with your education and brains, you might scheme up a way. That's why I sent for you, Case."

Case stared at the grey man and his memory went back to when he was a rag-

ged, homeless kid, prodding a mule along the dark caverns beneath the earth. He remembered how Ed Hall had saved his meager wages. He remembered how Ed had used that money to make Case Yewing a mining engineer.

"Be hard to build even a Mexican ore roaster, with men gunning for you," he said.

"I stopped them shooting at our crowd," said Ed, and faint satisfaction touched his tired face. "I got a bright idea and made the others see it."

"What's that?" asked Case.

"We sold out," said Ed. "All of us sold out to Case Yewing. The deeds are recorded and Amalgamated Central has been going crazy trying to find the bold gent who had the nerve to buy at their price, right under their nose."

Case stiffened. "You crazy damned fool," he said. "What if something happened to me? I haven't been teaching Sunday School or walking a primrose path."

"I know," said Ed. "It was a gamble, but it saved some lives. But it was no gamble like the spot I put you in, because I got greedy. I have the other deeds with me, the ones from you to my crowd. I'd be obliged if you'd sign them back to me, Case."

He brought the folded papers out of an inner pocket. Case took them. By all the legal rights, he was worth a quarter of a million dollars. A sardonic smile turned the corners of his lips as he took the pen from Ed Hall and scrawled his name, ten times. "Now," he said. "How do we fight, Ed?"

ED put the papers into his pocket, his face mirroring his relief. "We don't fight any more. You get off at Smeltertown and turn back. Don't even show your face there, if you can help it. Somebody might recognize you. Stick around the depot and take the night train east."

Case shook his head. "Sounds like running, Ed."

Ed stood up, anger touching him. "I don't give a damn what it sounds like. I can see and think straight again. I helped bring you up and I won't help kill you. You don't owe the others anything. They're strangers to you."

"I'll ride on to Copperhead with you anyway," said Case. "I'd like to look over your property."

"You get off at Smeltertown," said Ed. "You show yourself in Copperhead and I'll tell my crowd I found out you worked for the Syndicate. They'd ride you out of town on a rail, but I'd sooner see that than see you shot dead. That sounds like hell, I know, but it's the only way I can see to pay you for your trouble."

Case stared at the old man and saw no softness in him. Rather he saw nothing to mar the deep regard Ed felt for him —that made the grey man so stubborn. Remembering that envelope in his pocket, he said, "All right, Ed. I'll get off at Smeltertown."

"Thank heaven, son," said Ed. "I was afraid you would be stubborn and make it tough for me. Now, about that girl in your car. Have you talked with her?"

"No," said Case. "Why?"

"She's my niece. My brother's daughter, Barbara, coming to live with us. We're the last of us, her and me. When you get off, I'll go sit with her."

Up ahead, the engine whistle shrieked a warning blast. The car lurched as the trucks hit a switch frog, then another. Yard lights flashed past the washroom window and Ed Hall's hand reached out.

"Thanks for coming, son," he said. "Too bad we couldn't make a million together. Maybe some other time."

"Some other time," said Case.

He quit the washroom, went back to his place, lifted his baggage from the rack and moved toward the vestibule. The girl looked at him as he went by. Case raised his hat.

"Goodbye," the girl said. "And thank you."

The train ground to a halt and Case stepped off, moving across another set of tracks to the paved station platform. He set his bag down and looked back. Miners and men of business were quitting the train. In a moment, the lanterns started to swing. The couplings jerked

and the train moved out. Seeing Ed Hall's shadow in the vestibule, Case raised his hand.

There was no answering wave from Ed. But Barbara Hall, watching from the coach window, raised the tips of her fingers to her lips, then waved her hand at him. Long after the train had gone, Case still stood there, staring after it. It took the flat report of a gunshot to jar him to earth. The shot meant nothing to him. It was part of the Smeltertowns all over the earth.

"Carriage, suh?" a colored man was saying. "You all wants a carriage, suh?"

"Yes," said Case. "Take me to the Syndicate House."

The man hesitated. "The Syndicate House, suh, that's where the quality folks stay. Folks like Mr. Marks, Mr. Alexander P. Marks and Mr. DeVain." He stopped and ducked his head, reaching for the valise. "*Yes, suh!* The Syndicate House it is, suh. I can see now you got business with the copper kings."

CHAPTER II

Gun at Their Faces

EVEN riding the carriage, Case was conscious of the ground shaking beneath him, the tremors caused by the great stamp mills perched high on the hills above the town. There was a vast red glow up there, the huge Syndicate smelter, belching its clouds of sulphurous smoke. The smoke permeated the air he breathed, the taste of it was on his tongue.

All his life, that taste, the shaking ground, the red fire-glow by night, had been part of Case Yewing. Life rough and dangerous. Danger shared by iron-muscled drillers and muckers who toiled beneath the ground. By the stamp-mill men who lived in bedlam all their working life. By the men who toiled over the vibrating recovery tables with their mercury-coated sheets. Men who felt their teeth rot and fall out from quicksilver poison, while they watched vast fortunes caught up and saved by that very poison.

"We ain't digging ore in Copperhead no more. Only graves," old Ed Hall told Case sadly.

All this and these men were part of his life. Their rough code of living was part of his life. Tromp your enemies. Go to hell for a friend. It had been easy, until now. Never before had the picture of a grey-eyed woman intruded to distract him from the pattern of things. He felt it as a weakness and he fought against it as he would fight an enemy in a dark alley.

The carriage left the warehouses and rows of squalid cribs behind and rolled

down broader streets: Lights burned everywhere. There was no night and day in Smeltertown; life was lived in two shifts. It puzzled Case that so few men roamed the streets at this hour.

Not until the carriage stopped before the imposing, brick-built Syndicate House did Case find his armor of toughness again. The driver opened the carriage door. A liveried porter lifted the valise from the carriage boot and stood waiting.

Case stepped out and stood upon the ground. He could think of no other way to pay his debt to Ed Hall than to move Ed's fight from Copperhead to Smeltertown. That was little enough in return for Ed's years of scantily filled lunch-pails and twice-chewed tobacco.

Case paid the driver and followed the porter up the broad steps. The porter swung the door wide and stepped aside. Case entered. The door closed behind him. There was no taste of sulphur in here. Through the thick, rich carpet covering the lobby floor came only the slightest suspicion of vibration from the rumbling stamp mills. Just enough to let a chosen few know that fortune's golden stream still ran full flood.

An austere clerk regarded Case. His precise, "Good evening, sir," was noncommittal. The register was turned toward him and he kept both hands on it.

"A room," said Case. "A good one."

The clerk said, "The rooms of this house are reserved for the officers of the Amalgamated Central Syndicate and their business associates."

Case picked up a pen, wet it and turned the register forcibly toward him. He signed *John Smith* on the register and put the pen down. "You can inform those elegant crooks that I have arrived," he said.

The clerk looked across the lobby and flicked his head. "There is no room here, Mr. Smith, unless you can prove your business. And there is plenty of help available, if it becomes necessary to throw you out."

Case stared at the clerk, but the man would not break down. And now, two black-coated men were moving slowly toward the counter, giving him their undivided attention. Case cursed under his breath; he could not afford trouble now. Reluctantly, he pulled the envelope—the one he had taken from the man at the siding—from his pocket and laid it on the desk. He would have liked to have known the contents of the thing, but it might have its better use this way. "See that Alex Marks gets this," he ordered.

It had its effect on the clerk. He said, "Ah, Mr. Smith. I have been told to expect you, but you can see why we can take no chances here." He handed the porter a key. "Room Twelve, Mr. Smith. A most comfortable room with a Marks Street view. I shall see to it that Mr. Marks receives your message."

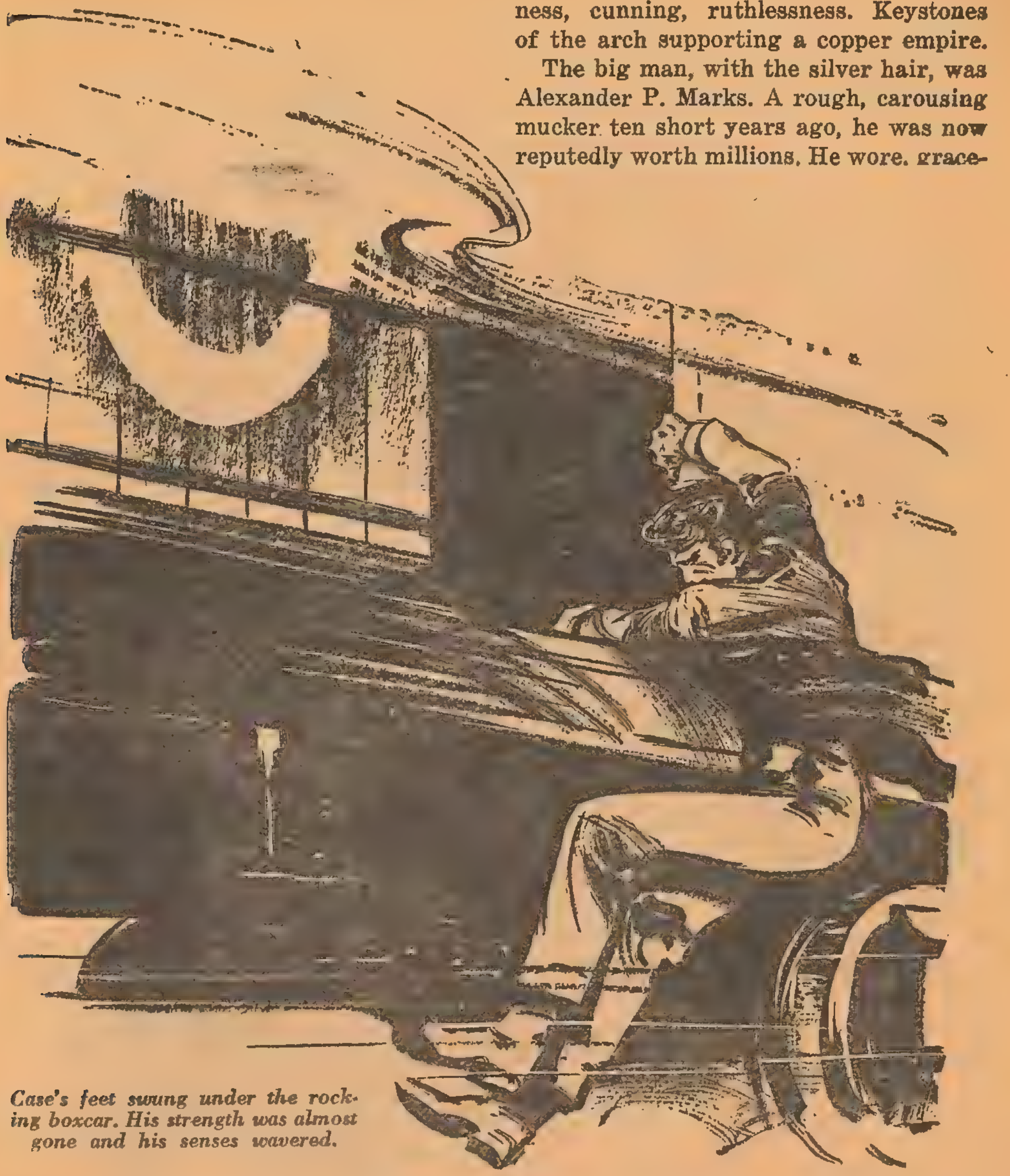
Case nodded and followed the porter to the second floor. The black-coated men had disappeared.

THE room was more elegant than anything Case had ever seen. Adjoining, there was a bath with a marble tub and wash basin. Bathing in the luxurious tub, Case wished that Ed Hall could be here to enjoy this. A lifetime of toil and sacrifice had earned it for him.

Case dressed carefully. Before he put on his vest, he lifted a heavy gun and shoulder holster from his bag and fixed it in place. His vest covered the harness and his long black coat covered the gun. After that he gave into his sharp physical hunger and decided to risk a meal. He went down to the dining-room.

Richness was concentrated here. Snowy linen. Candles in silver holders, giving off their soft light. Tapestries. Paintings. Beautiful women and well-dressed gentlemen. Beautiful women who looked at Case standing tall in the doorway. But no woman with grey eyes. None with a wisp of hair that needed tucking into place. Polite laughter. Low talk. The gay sound of corks popping from rare bottles of wine. And under it all, the faint vibration of the stamps to remind one where this richness came from.

A round table, with five places set, dominated the center of the room. Two



Case's feet swung under the rocking boxcar. His strength was almost gone and his senses wavered.

of the five places were vacant and Case studied the three men seated there. One was a huge man, distinguished with a lion's mane of silver hair. One was small and dark with a dainty black mustache and glittering teeth, his manners perfect. The third was a blocky, bull-necked man, half of his left ear missing. Even in his carefully tailored clothes, he looked ill-dressed.

Case knew them by their legends. Marks, DeVain and Chedernick. Shrewdness, cunning, ruthlessness. Keystones of the arch supporting a copper empire.

The big man, with the silver hair, was Alexander P. Marks. A rough, carousing mucker ten short years ago, he was now reputedly worth millions. He wore, gracefully, the environment he had created with his ever-growing wealth.

Jacques DeVain was the dark man. For a span of years Frenchy DeVain's shell game had taken dust from miners at every digging. DeVain was a cold, cunning man.

Sam Chedernici, with half his ear gone—Two-bit Sam. A rough-and-tumble fighter, his saloons had always drawn the tough element of the camps. Now he could match Marks and DeVain dollar,

for dollar, but his manners were only a mimicry of those two. He ate frog saddles, a la poulette, and Hollandaise potatoes, with a beans-and-bacon appetite.

Case ate his meal, never taking his eyes from those three as long as they remained at their table. In his own tough way, Case could admire them. Without wealth in the beginning, they had conquered the obstacles to wealth, each in his separate way. Together, they complemented each other like scabbard and sword and a strong hand to wield the blade. And behind their progress loomed the two currently missing members, Haverstall and Laughton, wizards of business and finance.

It was easy to see the reason for Ed Hall's discouragement. Ed and his poverty-stricken claim owners fought helplessly in the dark against unseen enemies. A furtive army of them. Here, the task was easier. Eliminate the generals and the army would dissolve. Case touched the gun under his arm and resumed eating, savoring each mouthful of food. He sincerely hoped the Big Three had enjoyed their own supper.

When he had finished, Case made a turn of the lobby, but the three were not in sight. Uneasy, he mounted the broad steps to his own quarters, opened the door and stepped through it, closing it behind him. The crystal-hung lamp burned low.

A man sat on the chair beside the bed. He had a gun in his hand. The gun was pointed at Case. "Hello, Yewing," the man said.

Case stared at the man behind the gun. He was small, his shoulders twisted by some accident, and the pallor of too much underground work was on him. He was young, too, not unhandsome, save for the bitter lines about his mouth. Case said, "You've made a mistake, friend. I'm Smith."

"You're Yewing," said the man. "You were the engineer for the Mountain Mining Company in Utah. When you worked there, you gave a man named Burke McCloud five hundred dollars, so McCloud could send his sister east to a good doctor. I'm Burke McCloud."

Case nodded. "I know you now, Burke. Looks like you've had some trouble. Why the gun?"

"It's like this," said Burke. "It's known around here that a man can make himself ten thousand dollars by digging up Case Yewing for the Syndicate. Seems like you bought some property the Syndicate wants. I can use ten thousand, Case. I never made much money in my life and, what I did make went to keep my sister alive. She died when I had my accident and was laid up for months. It's pretty hard for me even to get a job now, twisted up like I am."

Case watched the bent man, searching for some way to lower McCloud's guard for a precious second. And, all the while, he raged inwardly against the dog-eat-dog world that let the Mary McClouds die and the Burke McClouds get hungry enough to turn against a friend. Before he could get at McCloud, there was a knock at the door.

Case backed up against the marble mantelpiece, looked from McCloud to the door. Burke shifted the muzzle of his gun to a point halfway between Case and the panel. When the second knock sounded, he said, "Come in!"

The door opened. Alex Marks stepped into the room, Sam Chedernick and DeVain behind him. DeVain carried a rolled-up map under his arm. The three stopped in their tracks, staring at McCloud's gun. A bitter smile turned Case Yewing's lips. He had expected to see that expression on those faces, tonight, but now the wrong man held the gun.

CHAPTER III

Bullet Brand

CASE waited. Alex Marks forced a laugh. "We have been expecting you tonight, Lightfoot," he said. "Sorry we couldn't meet you with a brass band. You mad at us, or giving us a demonstration?"

A pinpoint in Case Yewing's brain

"You," she said, her voice dry as sand when she saw Case and the wounded Burke. "Does everything you touch get hurt?" she asked.

blew up, leaving him with scattered pieces of memory to piece together. "Lightfoot," Marks had said. Frank Lightfoot, the shadowy figure who had precipitated the fight for the Consolidated property in Mexico, where a hundred innocent men had died that a few might attain to great wealth. Case wished now he had killed that big man back there at Buffalo Siding.

Case looked at Burke McCloud. The man was trying to take in everyone at once, nervously wetting his lips. His face was white. Case tossed a straw into the wind:

"My friend is unpredictable, gentlemen." And then to Burke: "You want to talk now, Burke, or postpone this business until some other time?"

Slowly, McCloud let the gun fall between his knees where it hung on one finger, cocked. "No reason to postpone it," he said. "Go ahead."

Marks relaxed, held out his hand.

"Marks, Lightfoot." He waved. "DeVain and Chedernick."

Case nodded to them, touched their palms. He glanced at the bent man in the chair. "Burke McCloud," he said.

Without moving, Burke nodded and said, "Hello." The three tipped their heads. Sam Chedernick said, "I've seen McCloud around town here. You must have been checking up on us, Lightfoot."

"I don't like that name," said Case. "Call me Smith."

"I like a careful man," said Jacques DeVain.

The door opened and a servant came in carrying a tray laden with bottles and glasses. He set it on the table and retired. "I took the liberty," said Marks, reaching for a bottle and pouring.

"Leave me out," said McCloud.

Case accepted a glass, lifted it with the others, drained it and put it on the tray. Never before, not even deep under the surface, with a million tons of bad ground overhead, had he been so keenly conscious of danger. It made his back crawl.

Alex Marks had finished his drink, lifted the envelope from his pocket and waved it at Case. "How much did Laughton and Haverstall tell you?"

"Nothing," said Case.

"That's just as well." The others nodded. Marks pocketed the envelope, turned to the window and pulled the curtain aside. Looking that way, Case saw the flare from the smelter redden the night. Marks turned away.

"Copper mining," he said, "to make money, must be done on a vast scale. That takes money to begin with. Hundreds of thousands. Those hardheads in Copperhead can't see that. They think ore in sight means money in their pocket. They have refused our offer of twenty-five thousand dollars a claim."

Case waited. Marks went on. "That was a mistake on their part. They have now put us to such expense that we have lowered the offer to fifteen. If they continue to hold out, they won't need any money."

Burke McCloud said, "I thought they sold to Case Yewing."

DeVain turned his black eyes on the bent man, but his words were for Case.

"They did, but that was to throw dust in our eyes. It's an old trick. But we know that the deeds were all drawn up, by a Copperhead lawyer, so that Yewing could sign the property back to the original owners. We have taken the necessary steps to prevent that."

CASE smiled, DeVain smiled with him and said: "I see you follow me, Smith. Yewing is due in Copperhead. When he makes himself known, that will be all for him. We've got to one of Hall's crowd, out there. He'll take care of Yewing. If he fails, you will do that job. We'll take care of the records."

Case bent a hard glance on the little Frenchman. "Where do I come out, if this man out there does the job? I'm not in the habit of wasting my time for nothing."

"Of course not," said DeVain. "If our man gets to Yewing first, you will be paid ten thousand dollars, as promised. But we don't trust our Copperhead man too much. That's why we sent for you. The position we're in, we don't dare muff this deal."

"I always have a free hand," said Case. "I'll want to know who your man is, but I'll take no orders from him."

"That's understood," said Marks quickly. "It won't hurt to have a friend there, in case you slip up, either. Here's his name." He handed Case a card with a name scrawled on it: *Ben Hoffman*. Case looked at it, put the name in his memory, and tore the card to bits.

"All right," he said. "What else?"

DeVain removed the tray from the table, unrolled his map and weighted the corners with bottles. In the center of the map were ten claims marked in red.

DeVain pointed with his finger. "There is the property, Smith. In case we fail to cut Yewing off, we have another scheme. It will be your job to handle it. Use any method you like, but get that property." From his pocket he produced a sheaf of ten signed drafts on the Wells Fargo

Someone ran up beside the train as it left Smeltertown, shooting through the window and killing Ed Hall.

Company, each draft good for twenty thousand dollars. He put them on the map.

"Each draft has the description of one claim on the back. When the deed for that particular property is surrendered to Wells Fargo along with the draft bearing the same property description, the express company will pay you the sum on the draft. You may fill in any payee's name you wish. The difference, between what you acquire each piece of property for and the amount of the draft, is your wages. Satisfactory?"

Case checked the property descriptions on the drafts against the details of the map. How nicely the Syndicate covered itself with a cloak of legality and, at the same time, built up a dread of their power by buying ruthlessness in their agents! A Frank Lightfoot would tighten the screws to the limit to save all he could from the price of each claim, for his own wages. Case could do nothing

but agree. He smiled inside himself.

"Satisfactory," he said, and pocketed the drafts.

"Splendid," said Marks. "We'll drink on that."

He filled the glasses and Case wondered how long Burke McCloud was going to wait, and what the chances would be when the break came. McCloud finally spoke.

"There's someone listening at the door," he said softly.

Without hesitation, Sam Chedernick said, "Shoot, you fool!"

The press of authority in Chedernick's voice brought Burke's gun up, but he held his fire. Case leaped, caught the knob and swung the door wide. The hall was empty. Wondering why Burke had done that, Case saw the knob of the next door down the hall turn slowly. He jumped for it, pulled the door open. Burke McCloud was coming now, the others behind him.

CASE stared into a shelf-lined closet. Pressed against the back wall, a girl stared back at him, her dark eyes round with fear, her breasts heaving with the restricted breathing of fright. She hugged an armful of bed sheets to her and the little apron, showing beneath them, told Case she was some sort of chambermaid. But the way her hair was done and the exquisite turn of her features made Case doubt that. But there was no doubt of DeVain's intent as he railed at Burke McCloud.

"After this, you shoot first and talk about it afterward," DeVain said. "I'd kill my own brother for spying on me. I'd kill anyone."

Case stepped back and closed the door. "False alarm," he said. "Good thing Burke didn't shoot and ruin a good door."

"Door be damned," said Marks. "DeVain is right. We can't take chances."

Case shrugged. They stood there for a minute. Marks said, "If it's all settled and agreeable, we might as well be on our way. Good luck."

Case nodded, watching Burke McCloud. DeVain smiled and started for the stairs. Sam Chedernick prodded Case with his thumb. "Do a good job and we won't ever forget it. Pull a trick on us and we won't forget that, either. We've got long arms."

The man turned away and Case braced himself. This would be the time for Burke McCloud to speak. The little man had earned a double reward, now.

Yet McCloud said nothing until the three were gone. Then he said, "Let's go inside, Yewing."

Case walked into his room. McCloud followed him, closed the door and edged around. Case said, "I don't get you, Burke. You kicked ten thousand dollars away."

McCloud's features twisted up. "Some things are worth more than money. I didn't know Case Yewing was Frank Lightfoot, too. No wonder bighearted Case Yewing gave me five hundred dollars to doctor my sister. It was Frank Lightfoot who caused her trouble. She told me." He brought his gun up. "If I had ten thousand dollars, I'd pay it all to get this chance at you."

Case raised his hands. "Wait!" he said. "Don't be a fool, Burke. Kill me and you'll never get out of this hotel alive."

"What difference does it make? I've got nothing to live for."

A soft knock at the door made McCloud's hand shake. He said, "Open it. See who it is. And move slow."

Case turned, moved to the door, put his hand on the knob and jerked hard, hoping to swing himself out into the hall and make McCloud miss. All he accomplished was to throw himself aside. The door was locked. Where he should have been standing, a long splinter, chest high, shot from the door panel. A hole appeared as, outside in the hall, a gun roared.

Behind him, Case heard the wet impact of lead against flesh. Burke McCloud cursed and tipped over, dropping his gun.

CHAPTER IV

Flight to an Undertaker

CASE jumped, scooped the gun from McCloud's groping hand. Turning toward the door, he leveled the weapon.

But he could not fire. No telling who was out there. He remembered the girl in the closet.

Was it the girl?

Waiting took toll of his nerves. Burke McCloud groaned, hollowly. There was no sound from the hall. Later, Case almost fired when a heavy fist rapped on the splintered panel. A man asked, "What goes on in there? What happened?"

Case stepped to one side. "The door is locked from the outside," he said. "Get it open or break it down. Come in slow."

He turned the lamp low, darkening the room. The latch clicked and the door swung open. The hall lamps showed him the two black-coated men he had seen earlier in the lobby. Both held guns. Both were stiff and suspicious of the dark room. One of them said, "If you're in there, Smith, you don't have to worry about us."

"Put away your guns," ordered Case. "Someone shot through that door and got my friend. I don't take chances."

The guns disappeared under the black coats the men wore. Watchful, Case let the lamp flare high. The pair came in, closed the door and stared at Burke McCloud. "Pick him up and put him on the bed," Case ordered.

The pair moved quickly enough. One turned back McCloud's coat. The bullet had hit the man under his left shoulder and gone clear through, a painful wound. One of the men said, "I don't like this. It's our job to watch this place. You got any ideas, Smith?"

Case could not bring himself to mention the girl. "Important thing right now is a doctor," he said. "One who won't talk about this."

One of the men went out and came back in quick time with a bearded doctor. The medico probed and washed the wound, bandaged it and took McCloud's temperature, showing a complete lack of curiosity.

"This is not too bad," he said. "The patient seems weak and rundown, but ten days in bed with good care will see him on his feet again." He poured several tablets from a bottle and put them on the stand beside the bed. "If he gets restless, give him one of these. If he gets worse, call me. I hope he doesn't. This has been a bad night."

The black-coated man who had summoned him said, "It looks like that to me, Doc. Who were those two in your office?"

"The big one is Frank Lightfoot. I don't know who the other one is, yet. A freight brought them in from Buffalo Siding. Someone had smashed them up. Lightfoot was out of his head. He kept yelling for Marks. It seems like every time a man gets hurt, he wants to blame it on to Marks and the others. I had to put Lightfoot to sleep to work on him."

Case followed the doctor to the door. The black-coated men fiddled around a minute. "We'll stick around in the hall, tonight," one said. "We won't take any more chances."

Case said, "All right. You know best."

WHEN the door was closed, Case paced the room. He looked at the white face on the pillow and cursed it. And cursed himself for doing so. Life had been rough with Burke McCloud. Grief and pain had been his lot. Now he was a millstone and shackles to Case, holding him back, trapping him. Over and over again he tried to convince himself McCloud would be better off dead. But he could not find that much toughness in his soul.

He went to the door and looked out. One guard lounged across the hall, the other one farther down. Both raised their hands to show Case they were alert. Case shut himself in again.

McCloud groaned and Case went to the bedside, thinking of the tablets the medico had left. But the wounded man made no more noise. He seemed wrapped in some terribly deep sleep, twitching and fighting in it. Beads of moisture gathered on his face. Case wiped them away with a towel and looked at the tablets again.

Thoughtful, he picked up four and walked to the table where the tray with its bottles and glasses still sat. He set

aside two glasses, carefully crushed two tablets into each of them. He filled the two glasses with whiskey and poured one for himself. Once more he went to the door.

"It's a long night, boys," he said. "A little drink won't hurt."

The man nearest the door said, "That sounds good to me. How about you, Hank?"

Hank came up the hall, grinning. "Never turn down free liquor, Jake. It's bad luck."

They followed Case in. He picked up his own glass and indicated the other two. "Easy digging," he said. The three drinks went down.

Case lifted the bottle again. "One drink never did a man any good. Let's fill them up."

After he had poured the third round, Jake's eyes were heavy and he put a foot out, suddenly, to catch himself. Case made himself laugh. "Maybe you should have watered that stuff, Jake. It's a strong man's drink."

"Good liquor," said Jake, rubbing his face. "Only I'm tired."

"Bed down on the couch over there," Case said. "I won't sleep tonight. Hank can watch the hall himself, then you can spell him. No use killing yourself."

"That's right," said Hank, fuzzily. "That's a good idea, Jake."

Jake needed no urging. He stumbled toward the couch, fell on it and was asleep, instantly, his breathing regular, but heavy. "Jake," said Hank, "ain't the man he once was. Now, take me . . ."

Case caught him, dragged him across the room and placed him beside the couch. Moving fast, he pulled the blankets from Burke McCloud, turned Burke sidewise on the bed and rolled the blankets right around him. Tearing strips from the sheet, he bound the blankets tight about McCloud's arms. The man groaned, but Case had no time for gentleness.

When Burke was ready, Case turned out the lamp, opened the hall door and went back to the bed. Drawing his gun, he lifted McCloud and carried him to the door. The hall was empty. Case carried McCloud to the rear, unbolted the door there and stepped out onto a stair landing giving to the dark alley below. Swiftly, Case let himself down into the smoky night, carrying McCloud.

Working along the dark alleys, he traveled toward the railroad yards. Time and again, McCloud whimpered about the punishment he could feel and not understand.

Block by block, pausing at each street until the way was clear, Case made his way. His arms ached, then grew numb. His shirt lay cold and dank against his back, wet through with perspiration, when he made the yards.

Winking switch lights mocked him. A clanking switch-engine moving up the yard searched him out with its headlight beam. He broke into a run. Across the yard, lanterns were swinging the highball sign. Up the track, headed west, a big six-wheeler took up the slack of a freight string, stomped it into motion with thundering exhaust.

Staggering, Case came up in the middle of the string. It was pitch-black, the cars but darker blots, gathering speed through the night. The dark maw of an open car door slid past Case. He forced himself on, faster. He came abreast, tried to lift McCloud high enough to ease him inside, gently. He could not make it gently. In the end he heaved the wounded man roughly onto the hard floor.

Case hooked his elbows over the sill. His feet went from under him, swinging under the rocking car. His strength was almost gone and his senses wavered. He gave a last, hysterical heave and made it, sinking down, gasping for breath.

The freight cleared the last switch frog, gained the mainline and speeded up. Case breathed normally again. He rose, rolled McCloud to his back and lifted him across the car. Ripping the strips loose, he freed the tight-rolled blankets, then sank down to lean against the car wall and cradle McCloud's head on his lap.

CASE hoped McCloud was tough. Time and again the man called "Water! Water!" There was no water. Case put a

hand on Burke's hot forehead and stared out the door. The lights of Smeltertown had dropped from sight, but the glow from the smelter still reddened the sky. Case cursed it monotonously until it too had long disappeared.

After a while it rained again. The temperature dropped and the car filled with the cold, fresh odor of wet earth. McCloud's hand came up to fasten a grip on Case Yewing's fingers and he knew the man was conscious. He waited. The car rocked jerkily and the rain swept in.

"Where am I?" McCloud asked faintly. "Where?"

"In a boxcar on a westbound freight," said Case. "This is Case Yewing. Take it easy."

"Yewing!" Burke McCloud struggled to sit up. Case held him tight.

"Quiet, I said. There's no medico to help you now. You've got to help yourself."

McCloud relaxed. "Where you taking me, Yewing? What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm trying to keep us alive," said Case. "Frank Lightfoot and his partner were brought into Smeltertown. They're bound to get to Marks and his outfit tomorrow. You wouldn't have lived five minutes when they found out you weren't my partner and I wasn't Frank Lightfoot."

For five minutes, Burke McCloud held silent. "Then you're *not* Frank Lightfoot, too."

"Not Frank Lightfoot," said Case. "No."

McCloud's shoulders rolled irritably as he struggled with doubt and fragments of knowledge that were puzzles to him. "Then why did you make that play? What brought you to Smeltertown?"

Case told him. "I planned on killing them," he finished. "But the way it was, if I had pulled a gun, you would have shot me down."

Burke rolled his head. "I would have shot Lightfoot. But not you. I knew it when you walked in the door, but I never got a chance to tell you."

"It's all over," said Case. "Forget it."

"We're traveling toward Copperhead,"

Case caught her as she swayed forward, and held her close.

said Burke. "It's not over yet."

"We'll get off at Copperhead and try to show Ed Hall that twenty thousand is bigger than twenty-five thousand. When Lightfoot gets to Marks and the others, there'll be hell to pay and no pitch hot. I've got to get Ed and his outfit to cash these drafts before the Syndicate can move to stop them."

"You think it's no use to fight them, Case? You think they're too strong?"

"Yes. That's what I think."

"Too bad," said McCloud. "I'd like to see that outfit smashed. They'll do anything. The ore they're mining now won't run a nickel a ton and they've got their miners locked underground so the news won't leak out. I know. They had me locked up, but I got away."

It took Case a minute to digest that startling news! No wonder he had seen so few miners on the streets of Smeltertown. "Burke! You know what you're saying? You sure of that?"

"Positive," said McCloud. "They're just keeping up a front, now, to keep

Syndicate stock from smashing, until they make another strike."

Case pounded the car floor. "Then, by gosh, they won't make a new one at Copperhead."

McCloud stirred. "Then you're going to fight?"

"Fight, nothing. We're going to run. We're going to collect Ed Hall and his crowd and hit for the hills. Don't you see, Burke? We hide out until the Syndicate goes broke and the stockholders get to looking into things. That will force Marks to offer smelter facilities to the Copperhead people."

"Good," said Burke. "Good. Will you set me up against the wall now, Case? I've got to start getting well. You might need some help."

CASE humored the wounded man. He propped Burke McCloud up beside him, tucked the blankets tight against the damp chill. Burke's teeth grated together, but his voice was stronger when he spoke.

"It's funny about that business in the hall," he said. "That keyhole in the door was a big one. I could see light through it, then it went dark. It took me a long time to figure out what that meant. If I had shot when Chedernick yelled, things might have turned out different."

"I guess we'll never know," said Case. He started to tell Burke about the girl and changed his mind. Burke had troubles enough. It was all behind them, anyway. Even the rain was letting up. After awhile, it stopped all together. Burke's head lolled over on Case's shoulder and he slept.

Gradually the train slowed, the car jerking as it lurched into one curve after another. Case grew conscious that dawn was diluting the darkness. The faint outline of hills grew visible. Barren, rocky scraps that told of Nature's violences when she hid her mineral wealth beneath the earth.

Up ahead the engine wailed a long blast and the freight train slowed. Empty cars, resting on sidings, slid by in the half light. Case crawled to the door. Up ahead, the red walls and peaked roof of a station came out of the morning mists. Under the eaves a white sign hung:

COPPERHEAD

Case went back to Burke McCloud and shook him awake. "End of the line. You're going to have to grit your teeth while I carry you to Ed's house."

"Hell," said Burke. "I can walk." He tried to rise and gave it up, grinning foolishly.

The freight lurched onto a siding. Brake shoes squealed and the thumping trucks came to rest. Case lifted Burke to the door of the car. A sleepy-eyed man, with a green visor cocked over his face, came out of the depot and walked toward the engine. Case dropped down, gathered McCloud in his arms and started across the tracks. A man yelled at him from the top of a car down the train.

"Hey, you! What you got there? What you doing?"

Case hurried on, stumbling across the rails and roadbed ballast, finally making the shelter of the depot and getting it between him and the train.

The sun rose to touch the top of the high hills and lift the blue mists from Copperhead's streets. The town lay sprawled along the flat bottom of a broad, shallow canyon. The flat was mostly taken up by business buildings; a squat brick building with a bell tower dominated the end of the main street. This was the courthouse Ed Hall had written about, so proudly.

Across the canyon, west, the dumps and headings of the failing silver mines showed gloomily. On the east side, behind the town, houses clung precariously to the steep hillside, the only available place for their existence It was easy to pick out Ed Hall's house. He had written, ". . . so I built my shack under the only shade tree in the country."

There was no one abroad at this hour. Case found a road up the steep hillside and climbed toward the tree and cottage beneath it. His face was bright with moisture that made his growing beard stub-

ble unkempt and rough. He kicked on Ed's door and hollered, "Wake up, in there!" and waited.

In a minute the door opened. The grey-eyed young woman, Barbara Hall, stood there wearing a blue kimona. She stared at Case and the white-faced man he held. Her eyes turned dark.

"You," she said, her voice dry as sand. "Does everything you touch get hurt?"

Faint anger touched Case and he moved toward her, forcing her back from the door and going on in. "Where's Ed?" he demanded. "We'll talk about me later."

"Uncle Ed," she said, "is down at the undertaker's."

Case looked at her. "Who's dead now?"

"He is. Someone ran up beside the train when we pulled out of Smeltertown. He shot through the window and killed Uncle Ed."

Case fought against the shock of that news. "Did you see who did it? Did you get a good look at him?"

"No," she said. "I only know he was a big man. About your size."

CHAPTER V

Double Death

CASE placed Burke McCloud on a blanket-covered couch against the far wall of the room. When he turned back, the girl had not moved and her attitude had not changed. He said, "Did Ed say anything to you about me? Case Yewing?"

"Yes. He said you were the toughest man he ever knew. That you like a good fight better than a meal. That's all he had a chance to tell me. I wish now he had spent his time talking of pleasanter things."

Case bowed his head. How like Ed Hall to tell her a thing like that. There was no way to explain that was Ed's way of bragging about him among men to whom toughness of body and spirit was a prime virtue. Case struck tears from his eyes with a bent finger. That was his one moment of weakness. When he raised his head his eyes were dry and hot.

"I won't trouble you any more than I have to," he said. "If Ed were here, he would have welcomed me and given this man a bed until he was well enough to move. I'll ask you to be as courteous until I can find other quarters."

The girl looked away from Case. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's shot. He stopped a bullet meant for me, last night in Smeltertown. I couldn't leave him there. They would have killed him. They might kill him here if it gets out he's in Copperhead."

Barbara looked up again. "What about you? Are you in danger, too?"

"Not as long as no one knows I am Case Yewing."

A shiver that could have been cold or fright ran through the girl. "Very well. Your friend can stay here. I won't speak your name. There's been enough violence and killing. I want no more of it. I came here for . . . peace."

Burke McCloud reared up on the couch. "I think you better move on, Case. You're a stranger in town and whoever does the killing for the Syndicate will find you out sooner or later. Long as Ed is already gone, there's no use getting yourself killed over him. Nor me either. I can look out for myself from now on. Start running."

The girl turned toward him and saw his white face. "No," she said. "Stay here." She crossed over and pushed Burke down. When she turned around, the color was all gone from her face. She buried her face in her hands. "I don't know what to do. I don't know anyone. There's no money to go back home. There isn't even food in the house . . ."

Case caught her as she swayed forward. He held her close, holding her head down on his chest and letting her cry it out. She made no effort to pull away until her grief ran out.

"Don't worry so," Case told her. "Ed told me you were his only kin. That means you're rich . . . if I can make it so. Pretty soon you'll be able to travel where you want to go."

She raised her head to look at him and there was that stubborn lock of hair fall-

ing over her ear again. He caught it with his finger and put it back into place, making her all woman again with a woman's pride and manners.

"I'll get dressed," she said. "Excuse me."

"I'll be back," he told her. "There's something has to be done right away."

"Be careful," warned McCloud. "Keep out of trouble until I get on my feet."

CASE let himself out and walked down the hill to the town. The sun was higher and people were moving about the streets. The undertaking establishment was next to the general store and one sign proclaimed Burt Fogg to be proprietor of both. Case went to the energetic aproned man sweeping the store porch.

"You Burt Fogg?" he asked.

"That's right," said the man. "Stranger, ain't you?"

"I want to see Ed Hall," said Case.

Fogg put aside his broom, looking at Case over his spectacles. "Pretty early," he said. "But I guess it's all right. He's all finished up. I finished him up when they brought him in. Pretty bad about Ed. The man who got him would look good swinging from Ed's tree."

Case followed the man into the little building next to the store. The front room was filled with rows of benches facing a raised pulpit. They went through this to a dim back room. Two pine boxes stood on trestles there, covered with a sheet. Fogg pulled the cover aside and Case looked down at Ed Hall.

The grey man looked relaxed, as if in a deep sleep—sleep he had earned after a lifetime of dangerous toil. In that lifetime, Ed Hall had mined millions of dollars worth of precious metal for other men. Now, on the eve of wealth and luxury for himself, an ounce of the basest metal had taken his life. Case felt his vision dim, and shook his head, looking at the other box and the man it held.

"That's Jackson Cole," said Fogg. "Jack was a pardner of Ed's. Bushwhacker shot him through a window, night before last. Been holding him until today. Jack's girl, Nancy, has been out of town. Going to be a shock to her to find her father gone."

Case turned away, clenching and unclenching his big fists. Fogg looked professionally at his handiwork and pulled the covering back into place.

Case said, "How about the things in Ed's pockets? Did you clean his pockets out?"

"Always clean their pockets out," said Fogg. "Got all the stuff right here." He went to a shelf, took down a box and showed it to Case. "These things go to his next of kin. If you got a claim on anything, take it up with Judge Hawkins."'

Case looked into the box. There was a key, four gold double eagles and some silver. "Where's the papers Ed had?" he asked Fogg. "What became of them?"

"Why . . ." said Fogg, scratching his head. "They're gone, ain't they? Now how could that be?"

"I'm asking you," said Case. "Where are they?"

Fogg's face reddened. "You don't think I stole them, do you? You don't think I'd rob the dead?"

"I'm not saying anything," said Case. "Did anyone help you work on Ed?"

"No," said Fogg. "I do my own work. Were those papers important?"

Case shook his head. "No. They can be replaced. Forget it. I'll trouble you now for some supplies."

With a heavy sack of eatables slung over his shoulder, Case hurried back to the house. Burke McCloud was sitting up, grinning.

"I got a good nurse now," he said. "Better than that quack sawbones at Smeltertown. Miss Barbara has changed my bandage and I'm almost good as new."

"You take it easy," Case said gruffly, and turned his attention to the girl. Her eyes were startlingly grey again and the dress she wore heightened her loveliness. Case wondered if he was ever to see her, other than against a background of violence and death. Yet his tone was not gentle when he spoke.

"Did you go to the undertaker's last night?" he demanded.

Undertaker Fogg pulled the cover aside and Case looked into the coffin at the relaxed grey face.

"No," she said. "The marshal and the undertaker came to the train for Uncle Ed. The marshal got his wife to bring me up here and sit with me a while."

"You sure?"

Those grey eyes went dark again. "Of course I'm sure. What do you mean?"

Case waved a hand. "I brought you something to eat. Burke could use some hot soup."

"I'll fix you something, too," the girl said.

"Later for me," Case said, his eyes half closed. Who had those deeds? He remembered DeVain's words. "Hoffman will take care of Yewing. We'll take care of the records." Case could see how it would be easier for the Syndicate if they could keep the property in Case Yewing's name. Abruptly, he quit the house and

hurried down the hill. Maybe now . . .

TOWNSMEN looked him over, knowing him for a stranger, and he let his own bold glance touch them all. One of them was an enemy of his, a traitor to his friends, no doubt the murderer of Jackson Cole.

At the courthouse, an ancient clerk eyed Case owlishly when he made his request. "Almost got the book wore out recording transactions on them claims," he complained. "But I guess you got a right to see them. Want the maps, too?"

"Everything," said Case.

The old man carried two heavy books to the counter. "Jed Barclay," he volunteered, "made the surveys for the county and drawed the maps in the book. Jed's drunk most of the time, but danged if he can't draw a prettier map drunk than sober."

Case looked at the records first, caring nothing about a drunken surveyor. There had been no change. Ten claims in section eighteen had been assigned to Case Yewing and the deeds recorded. It came to Case now what the Syndicate meant by taking care of the record. If Ben Hoffman was successful in killing Case Yewing, the Syndicate could show up with a deed from Yewing to themselves. With Ed Hall dead and unprotesting, Ben Hoffman would even become a hero in the eyes of the very men he had double-crossed.

Habit made Case turn to the maps. The one showing the claims was similar to the government map DeVain had shown him last night. Case started to close the book, then stopped, memory prodding him. There was a difference in those maps.

"Something wrong?" the clerk asked.

"No," said Case, carefully. He kept staring at the sheet. The *creek*. That was it. This map showed a creekbed cutting next to the northernmost claim. DeVain's map had not shown that.

Carefully, Case counted the faint-lined sections to the edge of the map. The sections ran in perfect order. Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen, fifteen. He turned the page. Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen. Case almost swore. The sections ran in order, but the last map ended with section fifteen and this one started with the same number. And the contour lines of the two sheets did not overlap. They mated.

Case shut the book, finding it hard to conceal his excitement. "Thank you," he told the clerk. "I suppose this survey is pretty old."

"No, it ain't," said the clerk. "Only two years. You can still find flags sticking up at some of the section corners. Corner of eighteen is just over the bridge. Jed built that one up pretty good when he tied them rich claims into it."

Case sauntered out, fiddled around a minute, then turned toward the bridge. The rock cairn, marking the corner of section eighteen, was easy to find. Case put his back to it and started north.

The sun was almost overhead when he started back at a half run. Jed Barclay's mistake was on the ground, too. The rich copper claims that Ed Hall had died for were in section nineteen. Unowned. Free for the taking. And the land the Syndicate had sent Case Yewing to buy lay in section eighteen, barren of mineral.

IT was beginning afternoon when Case entered Copperhead again. Excitement worked in him like a drug. He rounded the corner of the courthouse. A hearse, drawn by two black horses, moved slowly down the street. Behind it was a carriage. Case caught a glimpse of Barbara Hall, inside.

Beside her sat a young woman, a black veil covering her face, her head bowed in grief. A handsome, full-faced man leaned toward her, talking. Behind the carriage were buggies and wagons and, behind them, a hundred men and women trudged on foot. Ed Hall and Jackson Cole were on their way to Copperhead's newest diggings, the graveyard.

Barbara Hall saw Case; he could feel her glance condemning him. To her, this was important, and Case Yewing, longtime friend of Ed Hall, had nearly missed the last rites.

He fell in behind the cortege. Slowly, it

wound up the hill to a flat where crosses and stones, some glittering new, marked other graves. The hearse, the carriage and the buggies stopped. Those on foot moved on to gather around the two open graves, dug side by side.

The tall, handsome man stepped from the carriage, helped out Barbara and the veiled girl. A frock-coated minister came out to stand with Barbara Hall. Case thought of going to her, but he held back. Sweaty and dusty, he would attract too much attention. He stayed with the townsmen, moving to a spot near the graves.

The two women and their escorts held back. A group of older men stepped from the buggies and wagons and walked to the hearse. Burt Fogg opened the doors and the old men lifted out the two boxes and carried them to the graves to lower them down with ropes. When the ropes were put away, Barbara came up, holding the veiled, grief-stricken girl by the arm. The minister stepped aside and opened the book. Hats came off.

"Thou art the resurrection and the life . . ." the minister began. On and on he went. Barbara stared stolidly at the graves. The veiled girl sobbed softly. The full-bodied, handsome man had his arm about her now. He looked nervous and strained. Behind Case, a woman whispered:

"The Cole girl won't be so uppity about Ben Hoffman now. He's all she's got to turn to."

Case caught his breath and fixed a solid stare on the man. Ben Hoffman, the one who waited to kill him. The man the Syndicate had bought out to send bullets crashing through windows of a night. Anger rose in Case to choke him up. His eyes shone so bright with it that when Ben Hoffman felt his glance and looked up, Hoffman's eyes shifted quickly away.

The minister finished. He tossed a clod on both boxes and stepped back. Fogg and his assistants stepped up with shovels. The crowd started drifting away. By the time the graves were mounded, there were only a dozen or so old men left beside the minister and the girls.

And now a blond giant stepped to the graves. His fists were clenched and half raised. His face worked and tears ran down his cheeks. "I t'ink I say my word now," he said. "I t'ink I say to Ed and Jack, we will find the one who did dis thing and we will kill him. Amen."

"Amen," chorused the old men.

And while that pledge still hung in the air, the veiled girl pointed at Case.

"You might start with that man. Last night, in a room of the Syndicate House, in Smeltertown, the Amalgamated outfit paid that man to get our claims. They told him to use any method he wanted to use. From what I know, murder is one of them."

With a sweep of her hand, she dashed the black veil aside. Case had looked on her face before, in that hall closet at the Syndicate House.

CHAPTER VI

Deeds to Death

IT took some time for the old men to understand what Nancy Cole had said. When it came to them, they made no sound. Silently, fists doubled, they moved. The giant blond Swede, who had shaken his fists over the graves, was the first to lay hands on Case.

Case made no move. Another man said, "Get that rope!" A redheaded Irishman stepped up and drove his fist into Case's face. Barbara Hall raised a hand to her mouth, her face drained of all color. Even the Cole girl's eyes were wide with the horror of the thing she had started in motion. Only Ben Hoffman stood aloof, his face without expression.

"Wait!" Barbara Hall charged through the men who struggled to get at Case. She shouldered the irate Irishman aside, whirled to stand in front of Case. "Wait! You're wrong. Nancy's wrong. This man is Case Yewing. He's your friend. Uncle Ed had told you about him. Uncle Ed pointed him out to me when Mr. Yewing left the train at Smeltertown. He got off there to try to help you."

The old men looked at her and Case felt

the hard grip on his arms relax a little, but they did not let him go. He rubbed his bruised jaw on his shoulder and looked at Ben Hoffman. Hoffman's glance held vital interest now. A stooped, silver-haired man stuck his face up to Barbara.

"You calling Nancy Cole a liar, miss? You say she was seeing and hearing things at Smeltertown?"

"No. I'm not saying that." Barbara looked at Nancy, pleading. "I am only saying this man is Case Yewing, your friend. Nancy could be mistaken. Couldn't you have been mistaken, Nancy?"

The grief-stricken daughter of Jackson Cole came forward to look intently into Case's face. "No," she said, miserable. "This is the man. I had a good look at him. Maybe he is Case Yewing. They called him Frank Lightfoot. Maybe Case Yewing is Frank Lightfoot."

"By heaven!" said a man. "Maybe he is."

"Listen to me!" Case shouted at them. "You, Nancy Cole. After what you heard last night, would Frank Lightfoot have let you live, after he found you in that closet?"

Nancy tried to meet his glance and failed. "No," she said. "I guess not. I appreciate what you did. But you talked with those Syndicate men. You planned to get the best of us here. You were friendly with them."

"Yeah, Yewing!" yelled a man. "Talk your way out of that one!"

Case shook his head. "It will have to be enough for you that I went there because there was nothing else to do after I talked with Ed on the train. I called on Marks and his partners to try to pay Ed back a favor he'd done me. That they took me for Frank Lightfoot is another thing. It was their mistake."

Ben Hoffman fiddled with indecision, standing first on one foot, then the other. "This man looks like the one Ed was always talking about," he finally said. "I'd say he was Case Yewing, all right. There's one way to tell." He looked at Case. "What did Ed want you to do when he saw you?"

"Sign some deeds," said Case, cursing to himself that he be thus forced to prove his identity to the man who had orders to shoot him dead.

"Did you sign them?"

"I did. Ed had those deeds on him when he was shot."

Burt Fogg, the undertaker, jumped around. "He had them on him when I brought him into the parlor last night. When this Yewing came this morning to see Ed, they were gone. Yewing danged near accused me of stealing them."

A TALL, distinguished-looking man in long coat and high white collar moved around to face Case. "I'm Judge Hawkins," he said. "I made out those deeds for Ed. It doesn't matter that someone stole them. I can make out duplicates. Would you care to sign duplicate deeds if I write them up?"

Case looked at him. "Are you satisfied that I'm Case Yewing?"

They all looked at him. Only one man still clung to Case's arm. They were undecided. One said, "What do you think, Judge?"

The tall man held out his hands, palms up. "You all heard this young woman, Ed Hall's niece, say he is Yewing. Can we doubt a woman's word, gentlemen?"

A growl of denial of any such intention went around the old-timers. Case stepped free. "All right," he said. "I'll sign duplicate deeds. I'll sign them one week from today, if you all promise to let me alone."

They reacted to that as if he had spat at them.

"Now wait a minute," said one. "Who's telling who around here, anyway?"

"Young man," said Judge Hawkins. "A minute ago, you as good as had a rope around your neck. These men are wrought up. They've suffered too much over this business already. You ought to know better than to play with matches around a short fuse."

"There will be more violence and killing if I sign over to them now," said Case. "You sold out to me once to stop that. I want to see it kept that way. And if any of you want to get any ideas, remember

this. Dead men can't sign deeds. But a man, before he dies, can make a verbal will that will hold in court. You lay a hand on me and I'll will those ten claims to Alex Marks and his partners."

A roar went up. Case let it wash against him and die away. But he knew that they were beaten. "The best thing you could do in that week," he said, "would be to hole up someplace where the Syndicate guns can't sight on you. When you come back, you'll be richer men and alive to enjoy it. You could leave one man here to keep you posted. Hoffman, there. You can tell him where you're going, just in case there is any change. The Judge can tell him when the deeds are signed. I'll step over yonder while you talk it over and make up your minds."

Boldly, he took Barbara Hall's arm and led her over toward the carriage, out of earshot. "I have done nothing for you," he said, humbly, "to make you stand up for me the way you did. You told the truth, but you didn't know you were telling it. Why did you do it?"

Barbara Hall looked at him and looked away. Case shook her arm. "Why did you do it?"

Barbara looked at him again, and this time she did not look away. "I had a reason," she said. "But it's not my place to tell you what it was."

It was Case who looked off toward the hills now, because the reason was in her eyes for him to see. "Thank you," he said, shaken. "I wish the honor didn't make me feel so sad."

The girl started. "Sad? Why does it make you feel that way?"

"Because," said Case, "what you think about has nothing in common with shooting a man down with a gun. That is what I have to do before this day is over. I have to shoot or be shot."

The girl's eyes widened and there was sudden fear in them. "Because I spoke your name," she said. "But I had to. They would have hung you with that rope."

"Hush," said Case. "I'm glad you had the nerve to make a choice. Here come the others."

The old men milled toward them. The

Case staggered toward the sound of Chedernick's commanding voice.

Irishman, who had hit Case, said: "It looks like you got us down a shaft and pulled the ladder up, Yewing. We'll do as you say and wait you out. If you change your mind, go to Judge Hawkins. Hoffman will keep an eye on you." He doubled his big fist and looked down at it. "I wish there was some other way to do this."

"You'll do it my way," said Case, watching Hoffman carefully.

The Irishman threw up his hands and headed toward his rig. The rest followed him. Ben Hoffman handed Nancy Cole into the carriage, saying, "I hate to take you to that house to stay alone, darling."

"She'll come with me," said Barbara. "You will, won't you, Nancy?"

"Yes," said the girl. "I'll be glad to."

CASE helped Barbara in and closed the carriage door. Ben Hoffman turned to move behind the carriage to

the other side and Case moved with him. Case said, softly, "Thanks for what you did, Ben. Marks said you were a good man and he's not wrong. I'll see that he hears about this."

Hoffman batted his eyes and his brow wrinkled up. "I don't know what to believe," he said. "Who are you, anyway?"

Case winked at him. "Not here, Hoffman. If we can get together tonight, I'll prove to you who I am."

Hoffman nodded. "All right. I'll be in the Copperhead Bar."

Case nodded also.

Hoffman climbed into the carriage, the driver turned the rig and pulled away. One by one the others followed. No one offered to give Case a ride. He walked down in the dust behind Judge Hawkins' buggy. When the judge pulled up before a two-story building, climbed down and mounted the stairs to the second floor, Case turned away to the Wells Fargo office.

When the express agent came to the wicket, Case said, "I'm Case Yewing."

"I know," the agent said. "I was on the hill."

"Now about company business," said Case. "I take it you are to follow your instructions and keep your mouth shut so as not to interfere with or injure a man's chances to make a profit. Is that right?"

"That's right," admitted the man. "We hold all transactions confidential."

"Good enough," said Case. "Remember that." He placed the Syndicate drafts before the man. "You know about these?"

"Yes," the agent said, startled. "The Smeltertown office advised me about them."

"All right," said Case. "I'll be back here just as soon as Judge Hawkins can write deeds to cover these drafts. In return, I want three drafts, each made out for one third the amount I will have coming. Leave the names of the payees blank."

"Very well," said the man, in an unfriendly way.

Case wasted another minute with the man. "I would hate to be in your shoes if the Syndicate ever found out you talked too much and spoiled this deal."

Case got no answer, but he felt safe enough for the moment as he legged it back to Judge Hawkins' office. The old man turned from contemplating the street beneath the window. "What now?" the judge asked.

"I want you to make out those deeds for me to sign," said Case.

A smile cracked the lawyer's face. "Now you're talking, Yewing. I couldn't see any sense in waiting. It sounded crazy."

Case sat down. The judge took blank forms from his desk and wrote busily. A big clock on the wall ticked off the minutes. Vital, precious minutes. Any one of those clockticks might see a message speeding over the telegraph wires, ordering the Wells Fargo agent to refuse to honor those drafts. Or the agent might break the rules he swore by and betray his secret to the Copperhead men.

It took an hour. The judge stacked the legal documents and handed them to Case. "There you are, Yewing. I'll feel a lot younger when you sign those. I never did like the gamble of deeding that property to you."

Case stood up. "Stay old for a few minutes more, Judge," he said. "I'll be right back."

Case hurried back to the express office. The agent seemed more unfriendly than ever. Case borrowed a pen and signed the deeds, scratching out each claim owner's name and substituting Amalgamated Central Syndicate in its place. Then he put the deeds out on the counter, matching each one with its corresponding draft.

The agent examined them carefully, scowling. "Looks to me," he said, "as if somebody's getting the double-cross. But I guess there's nothing I can do about it." He picked up the pen and made out three drafts for Case. "There you are, Yewing. The eastbound train will be through here in half an hour."

"Those deeds better be on it," said Case.

"You better be on it, too," said the man. He gathered up the papers and

turned his back. That was expressive.

Case went back up the street again, feeling uneasy now. Those three drafts in his pocket were as good as gold to any man. And Ben Hoffman might not have been fooled a bit. There was still a lot Case had to do.

THE judge sat in an armchair, his face lined with anxiety. Case crossed the office to him, reached out and pinched the man's arms to the chair.

"Judge," he said, "what would you do if you know I changed names on those deeds and sold those claims to the Amalgamated outfit?"

Hell shone in the old man's eyes. "I would kill you, Yewing."

"Why?"

"Because the men who discovered and proved those claims are my friends. It has always been a part of my code, sir, to look after my friends."

"Thank heavens," said Case.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I have just sold the Syndicate those claims."

Prepared as he was, Case could barely cope with the surge of that wiry body beneath him. He was forced to slam the judge forcibly back into the chair and use a knee to pin him there. Then he waited until the old man's profanity ran out.

"I sold them," Case said then, "because our friends never owned them. Your drunken surveyor, Jed Barclay, has mapped out two sections fifteen. The error is in the book and on the ground. I checked it this morning. That's why I wanted our friends out of town. If I had told them the truth, they would have rushed to Smeltertown and laid themselves wide open for a killing. As it is, the Syndicate will be off guard for a while when they get those deeds."

For a long time the judge stared up at Case. "Son," he said, "if what you say is true, your life is not worth a nickel cigar. Why did you do it?"

"It's been my code, too," said Case, "to pay my debts. The money I collected is going to a good cause. It's going to the three people most hurt in this deal. Nancy Cole, Barbara Hall and a man named Burke McCloud." He paused, listening. From far off came the faint scream of the eastbound's whistle, signaling the Copperhead stop. Case looked into the judge's eyes. "Can you move fast, Judge?"

"Why?"

"By moving fast, you can make the train for Smeltertown. The first thing in the morning, you can file those claims in section nineteen for your friends. File Jack Cole's claim for Nancy. File Ed's for Barbara Hall. And Ben Hoffman's for Burke McCloud."

"What's the matter with Hoffman?" Hawkins wanted to know.

"Do as I tell you," ordered Case. "And don't wait. Those claims are wide open. They're a temptation to a man like me."

He stepped back and the judge arose. The train whistle rode the air again, louder, nearer, its urgency erasing the old man's indecision. He grabbed Case's hand, wrung it. "God bless you, son," he said. Then he was gone.

From the window, Case watched him leg it down the street toward the depot, long coattails flying. Men shouted at him, but the judge paid no attention. Later, Case saw a cloud of black smoke bloom in the cut, pause, and then puff on. The old man did not come back. He was on his way to Smeltertown.

Case sat down to await the night. That was all he needed to complete his work—physical darkness.

CHAPTER VII

Saloon Showdown

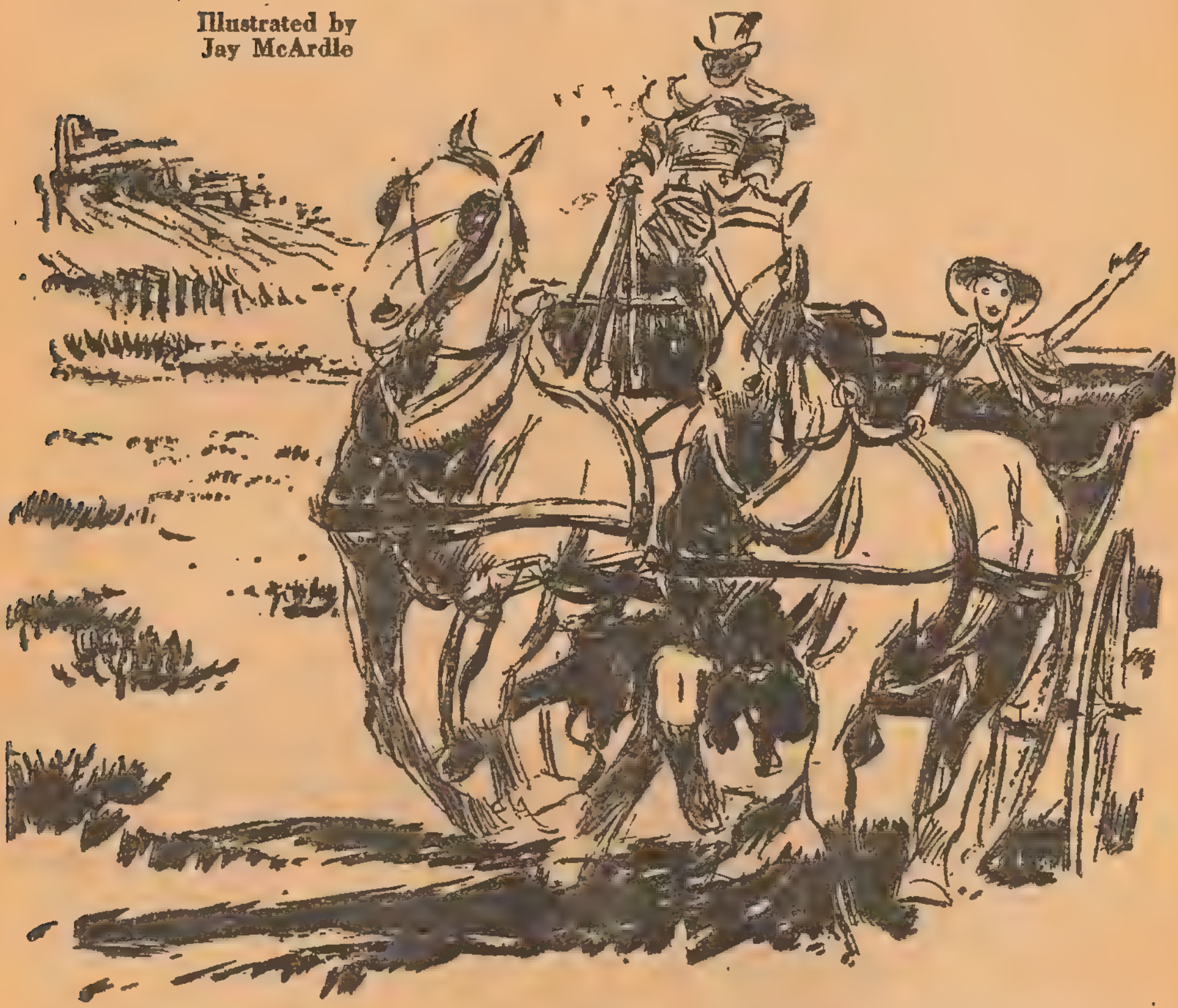
CASE filled in the names of Barbara Hall, Nancy Cole and Burke McCloud on the three express-company drafts and put them each in separate envelopes he found in Judge Hawkins' desk. Then, when night came, he quit the office and, hugging the shadows, climbed the hill to Ed Hall's house.

Barbara Hall was setting the table. Burke McCloud sat on the couch and

(Continued on page 68)

TROUBLE AT BLUE LODE

Illustrated by
Jay McArdle



Big Jeff Macklin wondered bitterly just what it took to be a gentleman—and now, returning to this boom town for a showdown with a faro dealer and a most particular woman, he decided he would find out, but likely not to his own credit. . . .

THE trail from Magdalena had been long and hard, and a cattle drive was never child's play. But once the mining fields of lower Nevada were reached, a herd brought such a fancy price in gold that a cattleman could afford to crow. And big Jeff Macklin meant to crow loud, in his own rowdy fashion.

This was his second drive up from the St. Augustine Plains, and he had another reason besides gold for returning to the boom town of Blue Lode. It concerned a faro dealer at the Golden Horn Saloon whom Jeff aimed to rope and hogtie—but not with a deck of cards.

His first stop, after selling his herd and paying off his riders, was a barber

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Jeff had traveled less than a mile when the rig overtook him. And its passenger — he couldn't believe his eyes!

shop where he had a shave and a haircut and a soak in the tin tub in the barber's back room. Then, smelling of soap and bay rum instead of horses and cows, he visited a box-sized tailor shop on Two Street. The bald little bushelman seated cross-legged on the big table, plying needle and thread, peered at him over silver-rimmed cheaters.

"It's the cowpoke from New Mexico, ain't?"

"You've got a good memory, Saul," Jeff said. "It's been a year since I was here. You got my suit ready?"

"For six months and more," said the

tailor. "And a fine garment, too—one fit for a bonanza king. You want a fitting now?"

Jeff said he did, and Saul climbed down from the table and brought out the suit. It was of fine gray broadcloth, and once Jeff had it on and surveyed himself in the tall mirror he found that it needed no alterations. The suit made his wide shoulders seem even broader, his narrow horseman's hips even leaner. He decided, "It sure makes me look like a dude."

"A dude, maybe," said the tailor, proud enough of his handiwork but doubtful about the man who filled it. "But clothes don't make the man, no matter what folks say. It'd take more than a fine garment to make a cowpoke into a gentleman."

Jeff Macklin was too well pleased with his appearance to take offense at such slander against stockmen. "I'll be a gentleman tonight," he said, "as a certain faro dealer is bound to find out." From the pocket of his old brush jacket, he took a gold-filled pouch. "How much for the suit, Saul?"

He was willing to pay a boomtown price.

AN hour later, having outfitted himself with new Justin boots and a flat-crowned gray Stetson, Jeff Macklin strode along Blue Lode's main street with as jaunty a step as any of the town's mine owners. Blue Lode wasn't much more than a year old, but it was almost as lively as that Queen of boom towns, Virginia City. It was crowded with people, and its main street bustled with freight wagons, pack trains, and all manner of rigs driven by late-coming boomers. There was a bank, a land office, a dozen general merchandise stores, a doctor's office, and several law offices. And for every other business place, there were two pleasure emporiums—saloons galore, from hole-in-the-wall bars to gaudy honkatonks. The Golden Horn was biggest of all.

It was mid-afternoon when Jeff Macklin reached the false-fronted Golden Horn. Outside, the honkatonk was merely a big frame building. But once Jeff stepped through the swing doors, he gazed upon a plush and gilt elegance the equal of which he had seen before only on Frisco's Barbary Coast and in the Creole quarter of New Orleans. A bar ran the length of the big front room, in sumptuous grandeur, and it was backed by a gleaming mirror. At the opposite end of the long room, there was a small stage where on occasion traveling show troupes put on their entertainments—once the Golden Horn had offered an opera star—and before the stage was an orchestra pit.

The middle expanse of floor was occupied by tables and chairs, but space was left for dancing—with the honkatonk girls—near the orchestra pit. Gambling, which made the Golden Horn the town's biggest bonanza, was done in an adjoining room. Jeff's entrance found the place, in mid-afternoon, poorly patronized.

One of the house gamblers sat at a table playing a game of solitaire, but it was not the dealer Jeff Macklin sought. He went to the bar, where but four other men stood, and ordered a drink. A moment later, the honkatonk's owner, Duke Rigby, came from his office and laid his chill gaze on Jeff. Rigby came along the bar, a sour-faced man whose dourness was an habitual thing. He said, "Howdy, Macklin. I heard you got into town with a herd."

"I said I'd be back, Duke."

"Sure. And I'm glad to see you," Rigby replied. "But I'm warning you, friend—I want no trouble with you. I've got trouble enough, as it is."

Jeff put down his empty glass, reached into his vest pocket for a cheroot. He lighted up before saying, "Keep out of my way, then, Duke, and you'll have no trouble with me. You know why I'm here."

"I know. But you've come a long way for nothing."

"That's between me and your faro dealer, Duke."

"Sure, sure," said Duke Rigby. "And keep it that way." He worried for a moment, about something or other. "Your

party is out right now, Macklin. Come back tonight, after the tables are open."

Jeff nodded, left the bar and headed for the doors, and Duke Rigby walked with him. They stepped out into the honkatonk's long porch which had a wooden awning to hold off the blazing sun. Jeff eyed Rigby narrowly, knowing there was something more the honkatonk owner wanted to say. When Rigby didn't speak, Jeff said, "You're sore because you'll lose a faro dealer."

Rigby shook his head. "What's one dealer?" he said. "Besides, Macklin, don't be too sure I'll lose that faro dealer to you. I've got bigger worries. Here comes one of them now. . . ."

THREE men in a group were cutting cat-a-cornered across the street and approaching the Golden Horn. Two of them were hardcases, men who hired out their guns and fists—men of low mentality and base brutality. They were burly enough, but they were dwarfed by the man they flanked. He was gross—a tremendous fat man who waddled as he walked. *Like a stuffed duck,* Jeff Macklin thought. The fat man was Hugo Lomax, a notorious dive owner who once, for a brief period, had been king of the Barbary Coast. Lomax and his gun-guards halted at the steps. A twist of the fat man's lips did for a smile.

"Stopped by, Duke," Lomax said, "to see if you've made up your mind to accept my offer. The time limit is up—now."

"You know the answer, Hugo," Duke Rigby said, tiredly. "I don't want you for a partner, and I'd be a damn' fool to cut you in on my business. It's your grief, if the Golden Horn is hurting your Golden Lily." He shook his head. "No, Hugo; I'm not taking you in."

Lomax still smiled, but his beady eyes grew bright with anger.

"Too bad, Duke," he said. "Because now I'll have to take over all of your place. Too bad. . . ."

He turned and waddled off, his gun-guards still flanking him.

Duke Rigby said, "You see, Macklin? Why the hell should I worry about losing

Warden's fist cracked through Jeff's guard, splatted against his chin. Jeff staggered back.

a faro dealer to you, when I'm likely to lose my whole place to that fat swine?" He shook his head sadly. "Take my dealer, and be damned—if you're man enough."

"I'd be man enough to nail Lomax's fat hide to a fence," Jeff said. "He's no better than a rustler or a claim-jumper. Why not run him off this range?"

"He plays a dirty game—from under cover," Rigby said bitterly. "He's a tinhorn, and he's hard to buck. But I'll be ready for him, the first mistake he makes."

Jeff said, "Well, here's wishing you luck." He started down the steps, then halted and stared at a fine carriage that came rolling along the street. The rig was drawn by two handsome bays, and it was driven by a colored man in lacky's

uniform. Its occupants were a handsome couple—a dudish man and a fashionably dressed woman.

The carriage rolled smartly by. The dude lifted his hat, and the woman waved. Duke Rigby nodded, but Jeff Macklin could only stare.

When the carriage was gone, Rigby said, "Now you see why I won't lose my faro dealer to you, Macklin? You can't buck a love affair."

Jeff's face had turned as sour as Rigby's. "You sure have got style here in Blue Lode," he said, and went down the honkatonk steps and along the street—in the direction opposite to that the carriage had taken.

LIKE any boomtown, Blue Lode came really alive after dark. Men poured into town from the mines and glory-holes for an evening's pleasure, bringing heavy pokes that would be lost over bars and gambling tables and too fancy ladies. Townsmen would help swell the crowds, and there would be the usual gathering of freighters. Jeff Macklin knew that the gambling room at the Golden Horn opened promptly at eight o'clock, and he entered the honkatonk ten minutes early. The bar was already lined, as were many of the barroom tables. The orchestra was noisily tuning up, and the gaudily-dressed percentage girls were present.

Jeff found Duke Rigby over by his office doorway, talking to four men who were of the same type as the two who had gun-guarded fat Hugo Lomax that afternoon. Jeff judged that Rigby was anticipating trouble and making ready in his own way.

Rigby nodded, and Jeff said, "I'm stepping into the gaming room, now, Duke. Any objections."

"None—providing you start no trouble."

"If there's trouble," Jeff said, "I'll take it outside."

He walked back along the room to the door of the gambling room. He opened it and stepped into the comparative quiet of the room of chance. Gamblers talked in low voices, and the seven or eight persons inside kept their down. Croupiers at the roulette tables were stacking chips. The operator of the dice game was lighting a cheroot. The dealers at the card tables were laying out chips and fresh decks of cards. Jeff made his way past roulette wheels and card tables and halted before the most distant faro table. The dealer was placing a deck in a deal box. Jeff said, "You sure this game is square?"

The dealer started, turned, and a smile lighted her lovely face. Her gray eyes widened, and her husky but melodious voice whispered, "Jeff—Jeff Macklin," in a breathless sort of way. Belle Shayne herself was breathtaking, and Jeff Macklin found his breathing suddenly labored. Belle was as lovely as he had remembered, and he was sure she had become more desirable to a man than she had been a year ago. Her hair was as golden as any nugget dug out of the earth. For a moment, Jeff stared. Then: "You shouldn't be surprised. I told you I'd come back."

"Talk," said Belle Shayne. "I hear so much—and believe so little."

"Still, I'm here," Jeff said. "A promise is a promise, with me. I said a year ago that I'd come back and take you out of this place—for good. I've built a ranch-house, Belle—log and adobe. It's got four rooms already, and we can add to them as needed. I brought a thousand head of cattle up from Magdalena, and I've got a big enough poke to support a wife. We'll have a wedding trip, too—up to Frisco."

He paused, seeing Belle's smile fade.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "You said you'd wait. You told me, sure you'd like to live on a ranch." Fear caught hold of him, for he somehow knew the truth that a year's wait had made Belle change her mind. "Belle, you don't mean—?"

"Jeff, I never said I'd wait for you," she said, not looking at him. "When you said you'd be back, I said that I'd probably be here. I was fond of you, sure. I still am. But life on a cattle ranch isn't what I want."

"You like this better?" Jeff said, gesturing to take in the gambling tables.

"You like giving a little of yourself to every man, and none of yourself to one man—as a woman should? A year ago, you were plenty sick of this place. You said you were tired of smiling at men."

Overcome by smoke, she was unconscious as he bent and lifted her. Most of his own strength was gone.

"That was the truth, and it still is, Jeff. But what I really want isn't something you can give me." Belle's voice was still low, but now it was shaken and dull. "Maybe I'm a silly fool—and a dreamer. But I want to get away from mining and cow towns—from miners and cowpokes. I want a chance to really live . . ." She turned suddenly, to face him, and her eyes were aglow. "Laugh at me, if you like. But I want to go farther than Frisco. I want to go overland—to the East, where people live decently and have proper manners. New York, maybe, where I'd be more than Belle Shayne, the faro dealer. I want to be somebody, and the wife of a man who's more than a cowpoke or miner!"

Jeff Macklin muttered, "Well, I'll be dumned! I'd never have believed it of you. Why, you told me yourself your father had been both cowhand and prospector!" A sudden suspicion gripped him. "Maybe you've got a man picked out who'll take you East and get you into high society. That dude I saw you with this afternoon, maybe."

Belle flared up, "Don't call John Warden a dude! He's an Easterner and a gentleman, and he's asked me to marry him!"

"So you're marrying him?"

"I could do worse—a lot worse."

"Sure; he's no cowpoke," Jeff said bit-

terly. "You don't need to say it. Well, I wish you luck, Belle. I hope you'll never regret that you reneged on a bet."

Belle's professional pride was touched. "Reneged?" she said, furiously. "What bet did I renege on?"

"On marrying me," Jeff said, no less angry than she. "I still claim you said you'd wait and marry me. A tinhorn trick, Belle."

He turned abruptly, leaving Belle Shayne to stare speechlessly after him. And when he got out of the gambling room, into the big and now crowded barroom, he felt guilty. He'd talked to Belle Shayne as he'd have talked to a no-good saddle tramp who had wronged him. It was something no woman could ever forgive. He was ashamed of taking his loss in such bad grace, and he remembered what Saul, the wise little tailor, had said. It did take more than a fine garment to make a cowpoke into a gentleman!

THERE were ways to make a man forget a woman, Jeff Macklin knew. A man could drown himself in cheap liquor, or he could take up with a woman of the same quality as the liquor. Jeff started out with both, but the liquor somehow tasted vile and the girl who came smilingly to his corner table was pretty but empty-headed and talked baby talk. Jeff finally lighted a cheroot and said, "Look, sister—"

"My name's Kitty, big boy."

"All right, Kitty," Jeff said, "tell me something. Who's this Eastern dude Belle Shayne is seeing these days?"

"Oh, he's John Warden—and awfully nice."

"What's his business?"

"I think he's a banker," Kitty said, forgetting her cute talk. "So you've got your eye on Belle? Well, you haven't a chance, partner. John Warden can make a woman forget there are other men. He's young and rich. His family's bank, back in New York or Boston or somewhere, is investing in mining enterprises. He came here to put the deals across. I heard today that he's leaving soon—at the end of the week. I guess Belle will go with him." She was matter-of-fact.

Jeff nodded, then reached into his pocket. He handed the girl a twenty-dollar gold piece, and said, "I'm in no mood for talk, Kitty."

The girl said, disappointedly, "Well, thanks . . . ." and went away.

The gambling room was open now, and men with heavy pokes and the desire to try their luck were entering to take a whirl at the games. Jeff sat there and brooded, hating the thought of Belle Shayne dealing from her box and smiling at the men about her table. But more than that, he hated to think of her smiling at one certain man—at that John Warden—and when she smiled thinking of being his wife. For the first time in his life, Jeff Macklin was jealous of another man.

He caught sight of Warden the moment the man entered the Golden Horn, and he did not like what he saw. The man was in his late twenties, and he was tall and darkly handsome. He had a pleasant smile, and his manners were good as was proved by the way he bowed to people. And he was better tailored than Jeff Macklin had considered himself to be, until this moment. John Warden's clothes didn't fit him; he fitted his clothes. Somehow, Jeff knew, there was a difference.

A waiter came by, and Jeff said, "Mac, tell Mr. Warden yonder that I'd like him to have a drink with me."

"Sure, mister."

The waiter caught Warden before he reached the doorway to the gambling room. Warden turned frowning, but on meeting Jeff's gaze across the length of the room he smiled in his polite way. He came forward, walking with the air of a man who has full confidence in himself. Halting before Jeff's table, he said, "I say, I'm afraid I've forgotten you, Mr. Macklin. The waiter said . . . ."

Jeff said, "We've never met, Warden. But I wanted to talk to you. Sit down." He pushed his bottle and a spare glass across the table. "Have a drink. I'm a cattleman, from New Mexico. Just got in town today."

Warden sat down and poured himself a drink, but he eyed Jeff curiously. And Jeff, now that he'd gone so far, was at a loss as to what to say. It wasn't possible to up and tell the man that he wanted merely to size him up—or that he wanted to find out if he were worthy of Belle Shayne. Finally he said, "I've got a big ranch, down on the St. Augustine Plains, Warden. I aim to add to it—graze more cattle on more land. Get to be somebody."

"Admirable, sir," said John Warden, still puzzled.

"Aim to take a trip East one day, maybe," Jeff went on. "But a tailor hombre said something to me today that's got me worried. He said it'd take more than clothes to make a cowpoke into a gentleman. What I want to know is how a man gets to be a gentleman."

"You're pulling my leg, my friend," Warden said. "Surely! Why ask such a question of me? A gentleman never admits he's a gentleman. Sounds too much like bragging. Now I'd say that a cowman can be a gentleman—in the rough, of course. Like a diamond, before it's cut and polished. Basically, Macklin, a gentleman is a man who is at all times considerate of other men. Follow that rule, and you can't go wrong. Now if you'll excuse me . . . ."

"Obliged to you," Jeff said.

WHEN John Warden walked away, Jeff called himself a fool. And he looked up from pouring a drink to find Duke Rigby, as sour-faced as ever, approaching. The honkatonk's owner said, "Glad to see you didn't start anything with Warden. Sensible of you to wish him and Belle luck. You can't be a winner every time, Macklin."

"Forget it, Duke," Jeff said. "I'll cause no trouble. But what about your feud with Hugo Lomax?"

Rigby's face clouded. "I've got my guard up," he said. "I've heard in a round-about way that Lomax aims to pull something tonight."

"Need any help?"

"I'll call on you if I do," Rigby said, and moved on. He looked taut and grim.

Jeff had no thirst, so he let that last drink rest. He rose, took up his hat, and walked from the place. Blue Lode's streets were more crowded than by day, and every man Jeff passed seemed in a jovial mood. The gaiety of the crowd mocked him, and he headed for the Union House where he'd already taken a room. Hugo Lomax's *Golden Lily*, a smaller and less gaudy place than Rigby's *Horn*, was directly opposite the hotel.

Jeff noticed a group of riders rein in before the saloon, and he saw the fat owner come out and talk to the newcomers. Jeff went into the Union, got his key at the desk, and went upstairs.

It was stuffy, too hot, in the cramped room, and Jeff was restless. He paced to and fro for a time, like a caged animal, and finally he decided to check out and to go to the livery barn for his horse. There no longer was anything here in Blue Lode for him, and he might as well hit the long trail for home.

He went down, paid for his room, walked from the hotel. And the first man he saw was John Warden. The dude no longer looked calm and mild-mannered. He appeared in a rage. He shouted now: "I want a word with you, Macklin!"

"Have it," Jeff growled.

"I've just left Belle—Miss Shayne," Warden said. "She's upset, almost ill, all because of what you said to her. She had to close down her game, and go up to her room. When I talked to you, I didn't know that you wanted to marry the lady. But Belle told me how you talked to her. It's clear, Macklin, that you don't know the first thing about being a gentleman."

"Maybe you can teach me—you being one," Jeff said, hating the man without reason. He knew he shouldn't be down on a man just because that man was luckier than himself. "If that's what you want, go ahead."

"Since you suggested that the woman I love is a tinhorn, that is what I want," Warden said, and struck the first blow.

Almost, it was the only blow. Warden's fist cracked through Jeff's guard

(Continued on page 75)

FRONTIER SAM

The true story of one of the West's great heroes, a quiet little gent by name of Sam Schlesinger. Some loud-mouthed braggarts of the Ninth U.S. Cavalry had little confidence in Sam's ability as a fighting man—but when it came up bloody battle against the savage braves of Roman Nose, then Sam became a hurricane! . . .

Illustrated
by
H. L. V. Parkhurst

"STEP right up here, you ornery, no-good, hulkin' galoots," shouted the leathery sergeant in a voice that boomed against the wooden stockade of Fort Hays. "Ain't ye ashamed tuh wear out the seat of yo'r pants 'round this yere post when 'o'r Uncle Sam offers ye a chanct tuh git in saddle and fight th' Indians? The Ninth United States Cavalry needs fifty men t' enlist. Step right up. Fust come, fust served!"

But the lounging group of frontiersmen who had gathered to hear the loud-voiced sergeant showed no disposition to avail themselves of the invitation. They merely spat tobacco juice into the dust, kicked a few Indian dogs yelping from beneath their feet and stared reflectively at the Kansas sky.

By NAT SCHACHNER

Sam took quiet, sure aim and fired. A buck fell crashing into the water.

"Well, I'll be a horned toad!" ejaculated the sergeant in disgust. "Ef'n you dumb—"

"Just a moment, sergeant!" interrupted tall, grizzled Col. Forsyth, who had been listening with some amusement to his subordinate's curious methods of recruiting. "Let me explain the situation to these gentlemen."

"Gentlemen!" muttered the sergeant scornfully.

But the colonel turned to the indifferent circle. "It's this way, men. The Cheyennes, the Comanches, and the Arapahoes have gone on the warpath. They don't like the railroad we're running through their hunting grounds, and they're massacring every settler between Bison Basin and Harbinger Lake. We've got to stop 'em. But we haven't got the soldiers. I'm a colonel without a regiment."

A lanky man with the red gash of an old bullet wound across his forehead stirred uneasily. "What ye say is mebbe so, colonel," he said. "But I had my bellyful o' sodjerin' wi' Grant an' Sherman. I don't aim tuh 'list fer anawther three-year stretch in no man's army."

"Me, nuther!" declared another. "I fit you bloody Yanks long enough in Virginny."

Col. Forsyth looked surprised. "What's this talk about a three-year enlistment?" he exclaimed. "You've misunderstood the

sergeant. We're not asking for regular enlistments. All we want is to *hire* you men—fifty all told—for the duration of this one campaign. The United States will pay you thirty-five dollars a month and forty-five cents a day for the use of your horse and equipment. All arms, ammunition and rations to be supplied by the government. That's a mighty fair offer, men."

Leathery faces seamed into broad grins. "Shucks, *now* yo're talkin', colonel!" shouted the former Union soldier. "Thu'ty-five silver dollars a month an' trimmings? Why didn't ye say so in th' fust place? I'm yo'r man—ridin' and fightin'!"

"And me, suh!" cried the Virginian.

WITHIN half an hour forty-eight men had thronged up and signed articles. "Doing pretty good, sir," said the sergeant. "But we need two more afore we kin start."

Col. Forsyth looked around. Seated comfortably against the logs of the trading post was a fair-haired giant. His brawny hands were clasped behind his head and he was whistling. "You, there," called the colonel, "don't you want to hire up to fight the Indians?"

The giant rose slowly and without haste. A mutter of admiration burst from the sergeant. He had never seen such a fine specimen of man before. Blond, immense, wide-shouldered, powerful!

The man strolled over, "If you mean me, colonel," he said with a touch of bragging, "I was jest waiting till t' others signed up. Me, you don't have to worry about. I'm an Injun fighter from way back. I've fit 'em—an' licked 'em—from Texas tuh Wyoming."

"We sure kin use yuh," broke in the sergeant delightedly. "What's yo'r name?"

"Smith. Charlie Smith."

"Here's yer paper, Smith. You'll git an issue o' Spencer carbine, revolver, a hundred an' twenty rounds o' ammunition, an' seven days' rations at the commissary."

The sergeant wrote furiously, then looked up at Col. Forsyth. "All we need is one more—'n we kin start."

"Yes, but where will we get him? We've combed the fort."

That was true. The sergeant scouted around, but couldn't find a single additional man in the stockade. Gloomily he reported: "Nary a one, sir. Mebbe we kin kinda forgit them orders—"

"Gen. Sheridan's orders were specific, sergeant."

The sergeant scratched his head. "I dunno then what we kin do?" he started. "There ain't a—"

The starved Indian dogs set up a howling and flung themselves furiously at the open entrance to the stockade A man was riding through. Both horse and rider were covered with dust and drooped with weariness, as though they had come a long way. The man was slight of frame, narrow-shouldered and thin. His cheeks were sunken and his nose sharp. He sat his horse uneasily, as though he were not accustomed to riding. No rifle was slung across his saddle, and no holster slapped at his breeches. He was unarmed.

The newcomer turned his nag's head toward the two military men. He reined in before Col. Forsyth and straightened his sagging shoulders. "Are you in command here, sir?" he asked. His voice was thin, like the man himself.

The colonel nodded. "Another complaint," he thought wearily. There wasn't anything he could do until he got his allotted force.

THE little man's eyes—dark, mournful—lifted to the officer's face. "I heard over at Fort Wallace you were recruiting men for service against the Indians. I'd like to enlist."

A loud guffaw burst from the sergeant. "We're recruiting *men*, brother; not—"

The colonel's icy glance broke him short in some confusion. But what he had intended was only too obvious. The little man flushed darkly—and said nothing.

Forsyth turned to him. "You say you came from Fort Wallace?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, that's hundreds of miles west.

You must have ridden through hostile Indian country!"

The little man shrugged. "I didn't notice any, sir."

"But, good heavens, man—without a gun, without knowing how to—er"—

A Colt lay close to Smith there on the ground, but his palsied fingers made no attempt to grasp it. Then Sam leaped at the Indian, bowie knife true.

The colonel caught himself. "Indian fighting is no picnic, you know."

"I know it, sir." His expression was sad, serious.

"But can you ride? Er—I mean, ride hell-for-leather?"

"I can learn."

"How about using firearms? I—uh—don't notice you possessing any."

"I can learn."

"It's no use," said the colonel kindly. "You've been lucky to get here alive. It would be plain suicide for you to join our troop. We've bloody work ahead."

But the sergeant's face suddenly lit up with unaccustomed thought. "Lookee, sir," he whispered to the colonel. "He's your fiftieth man. Why kain't we sign 'im up, so we kin start out all regular an' according tuh orders? We gits ten miles 'r so out, an' you kin ship him back—a sorta messenger."

"Hmm! I believe you have an idea there, sergeant. Put him on the muster roll and outfit the men. We start at dawn."

"Hey, you!" shouted the sergeant to the new recruit. "What's yo'r name?"

"Sam Schlesinger."

"Schlesinger? You mean you're a—?"

The little man raised his dark eyes.

Something flashed in their depths. "An American, sergeant," he said distinctly. "An American of the Jewish faith."

His tired nag turned and ambled toward the barracks. The sergeant watched them go—saw the rider bounce ungainly in the saddle. A look of puzzled astonishment spread over his face. "Well, I'll be a horned toad!" he exclaimed.

THE little troop had been on the trail for a week. Under the vast immensity of the prairie sky they sought the marauding Indians. There was plenty of evidence of their recent passage—the stark, blackened rafters of some poor devil's cabin, the burned-out field of corn, the horror of bloody bodies with spongy skulls from which the living hair had been torn.

Col. Forsyth rode in front. With him was Lt. Beecher, who had lost a leg in the Civil War, but who had refused to be retired from active service. A little behind came Sgt. Ward, shepherding his band of "hired" recruits.

They had been out a week, but Sam Schlesinger, the thin, scrawny, "last-chance" addition, was still with them.

Not that Col. Forsyth, with the kindliest intentions in the world, hadn't tried to send him back. But Sam, his face drawn with the agony of long hours in the saddle, had refused to be disposed of this easily. "You hired me for the duration of the campaign," he said in his thin, quiet voice. "It's a contract between me and the United States Government. *I'm* gonna live up to it; let the United States do the same."

The officer shrugged and the sergeant swore, but Sam clung to his saddle and managed somehow to keep up with the hardened frontiersmen.

He became a joke with the others. They made bets as to the exact hour when he'd fall out of his saddle, when he'd yell he'd had enough, when he'd go back. The odds were long against him at first; but as the hours passed, and the days, the odds grew shorter and shorter until the constant losers grumpily refused to bet against him any more.

Each night, at bivouac, he dismounted stiffly from his saddle and groaned when he tried to sit or lie upon the ground. But each morning, with teeth set, and the quick sweat upon his brow, he climbed clumsily back for another hard-riding day of torture.

A few of the kindlier men began to pity the citified little man. They wheeled their horses alongside and gave him pointers how to sit his horse easily, how to make a cinch, how and when to give his nag the rein or spur.

At night, stiff and sore as he was, he did his share of the necessary chores; then quietly asked Sergeant Ward for lessons in handling his unaccustomed weapons—the carbine and the revolver. The tough old regular at first swore at him and refused. But Sam persisted until the sergeant yelled he'd never come across such a darned little cuss—and gave in!

Sam learned fast. By the end of the tenth day he rode with the best of these men who had spent their whole lives in the saddle. He loaded and unloaded his carbine with the precision of an old-timer, and his draw on the heavy Colt was almost as fast as that of Ward himself. No real shooting was permitted, for fear of warning the Indians.

"Why, the darned little cuss!" exploded the sergeant finally. But this time the expletive was admiring. "If'n I had time, blow me if'n I wouldn't make a soldier outa him yet."

SLOWLY Sam Schlesinger became popular. His grit, his willingness, gradually caught the fancy of the company. "Frontier Sam!" they had first called him in jeering accents; the name remained as a term of affection.

Only one man refused to follow the swing in sentiment. That was Charlie Smith, the blond giant. From the very first he had determined to ride the little fellow, who weighed exactly half of his enormous tonnage.

"What in blazes is the U. S. cavalry comin' to when they take half-pint little rabbits like that?" he complained with a

jerk of his huge thumb toward Sam. "Why, he ain't even a jack rabbit. Them fellers 't least kin run."

Though Smith's voice was loud and meant to carry, Sam Schlesinger said nothing. His dark, thin face showed no trace of hearing; his eyes stared straight over the long swells of the prairie.

"Now, take me, for instance," pursued Smith. "I'm a rip-roaring sorta fellow myself. I killed so many galoots who thought they was gunfighters I ain't got no more room fer notches on my gun. *That's* the kinda men yuh need fer fillin' Injuns wi' lead pisening. Not runts what 'ud fall flat on their faces fust time they hears a Injun whoop!"

Sam rode steadily along without a word. Some of the others muttered, but, as one of them put it, 'twas no skin off'n their teeth. No sense in tangling with a fellow like Charlie Smith on account of Sam..

The trail of the marauding Indians grew fresher and fresher. It led to the headquarters of Beaver Creek and up to the Arickaree fork of the Republican River. Col. Forsyth's face grew grave as he studied the signs.

"There's at least five hundred of them," he told Lt. Beecher confidentially. "Maybe more. And they're led by Roman Nose and Black Kettle, the fiercest and most cunning of the tribal chiefs. We've got our work cut out for us."

On September 14, 1867, the trail became so fresh and obvious that Forsyth called a halt. "We're in for it, I'm afraid," he said to Beecher. "It's beginning to look like a trap. Those Indians have been too careless with their trail. They've been luring us on. I'm going to camp here before it gets too dark. In the morning we'll decide what to do."

Bivouac was established on the bank of the Arickaree. It was the dry season and barely a few inches of muddy water trickled over the clay bed. The surrounding country was undulating plain with few clumps of trees to give any cover. A mile or so away low hills and ridges rose to blot out the horizon.

Loke a good plainsman Col. Forsyth posted mounted scouts, ordered the horses carefully picketed, and had his men, after a quick bite of the scanty remaining rations, lie down by their horses.

The men forewent their usual rough jokes and horseplay as they bedded down. Not a man among them but knew that they would shortly be in the heaviest action of their lives. Sam Schlesinger performed his necessary duties with his wonted silence. Some of the men watched him curiously. Would the little man be able to undergo his first baptism of fire? But his thin, dark face covered his thoughts. Only Charlie Smith kept up a running fire of talk. He couldn't wait until morning, he cried. Let them Injuns come! He'd show 'em some plain and fancy shooting. And let that runt, Sam, stay out of his way. He couldn't be annoyed by a little so-and-so getting in his hair when there was fighting to be done.

"Quiet back there, men!" called Forsyth. "You need all the sleep you can get." And Smith subsided, not without some grumbling at these fancy West Point officers who gave themselves airs.

IT was not yet daylight. It was that short halfhour when the darkness begins to shade a little, when objects begin to take dim shape and form. Suddenly the half-light was shattered by a challenge and a shot.

"Injuns!" shouted a scout.

The next moment the plain was filled with rushing figures, waving buffalo robes and yelling hideously. Instantly each man of the company was on his feet, left hand reaching for his horse's bridle, right hand grasping for his gun.

The horses snorted with fear and plunged wildly at their restraining ropes. This was always the first move in an Indian assault—to stampede the horses. But it failed. Steadily, firing from the hip, holding on to halters, the little company finally forced the advance wave to retreat.

The sun was up strong now, and showed the distant ridge swarming with Indians, arranged by tribes. A full army of them.

"We'd better take up a position on that

(Continued on page 79)

A Man — And A Gun

In the room below, Pawnee's gun butt whacked Sergeant Campbell on the head, not quite killing him.

Illustrated
by
Newton H. Alfred

Pawnee Pondrel, the Dakota trading-post proprietor, was still a renegade at heart and frequently in action. Quinn Russell, the escaping prisoner of war, was still a Southern Confederate in his soul—so when they clashed in Yankee territory, with different purposes and ethics, the result had to be astonishing

★ ★ ★

By HAROLD R. STOAKES

QUINN RUSSELL wasn't wearing Confederate gray any more. It was hated Yankee blue with powdered dust of the prairie as thick as fur around the brass buttons, and spiky thistle seeds like spurs lining the creases of his pants.

Quinn had come down from the Yankee fort on the treeless Dakota plain, sleeping out by day and marching by night. Desertion is the word that Major Ambrose Amberly would later write across his papers, but Quinn liked the word escape better.

Ohio newspapers called them Galvanized Yankees, these Southern captives like Quinn who had volunteered for duty at frontier outposts rather than languish

out the war in Northern prison camps. But Quinn knew that you couldn't change a man's heart by plating his body with a different-colored uniform.

Being a Northerner was something a man probably had to grow up with, just as being a Southerner was something that was deep-rooted in the things you remembered and fought for. The uniform of Ohio would never be the uniform of Georgia, and there was no conscience in Quinn to repent the fact that he had broken his word and was running away.

War wasn't something you fought with the rules of a Southern fox hunt, or with promises to an enemy major. War was a business of killing and being killed—of cruelty and hunger and cold; and a lie or a deception of an escape were as much a part of it as the bullets that fit a rifle barrel with the snugness of ice moulded to the sides of a drinking cup.

Quinn had come a hundred miles south, skirting the edges of the Dakota Bad Lands, until now he stood in the gloom just outside Pawnee Pondrel's way station, where the dust was already sifting from the plains, obliterating the emigrant's trail that was rutted past the barren sod stables.

Pawnee Pondrel wasn't an Indian—nor an acknowledged member of any tribe, white or red. Before the Yankee fort had been built miles to the north so that the emigrant trail curved away, seeking its safety, Pawnee had done a curious sort of business, based mostly on the misfortunes of luckless pioneer caravans.

Now Pawnee would sell a dreg-filled cup of rum, or his misery and bitterness in conversation, his soul—or a cheap murder. They had told Quinn Russell that Pawnee would sell him clothes—sod buster's clothes that he could exchange for the hated Yankee blue, and that he could travel in by day until he reached the Southland again.

QUINN could believe all the things that he had heard when the slab-door was inched open, and tongues of yellow lamplight feruled the round, pock-marked sides of Pawnee Pondrel's large face. Pawnee's mouth was like a cold slash on a melon, and the fingers that edged the Sharp's rifle around the door were as hard and round as rattlesnake buttons.

When Pawnee finally opened the door and shuffled back toward the food-stained table, his short, buckskin-fringed legs had the listless, muscularly deceptive movement of the hindquarters of a bear.

"So it's clothes you're seeking," Pawnee grunted, his eyes burrowing like a rodent into Quinn's face.

Quinn moved near the fire where a little warmth pushed back the coldness in the room.

"A deserter?" Pawnee questioned, his button fingers curved against the table top.

"An escaped prisoner," Quinn said stiffly. "I am a Confederate officer."

Pawnee's laugh was as hollow as the wind off the trackless plains.

"North . . . South. They all find their way to Pawnee Pondrel. You will earn well the clothes you wear."

"I have money to pay," Quinn said, and hesitated.

"Money." Pawnee's hard fingertips drummed against the table. "What is money in a land where even the beaver loses his pelt?"

Pawnee's slashed lips parted, showing strong rows of yellowish, horselike teeth. "Destiny must have brought you to Pawnee Pondrel. I have a job to be done."

"I wish only to secure clothes and to continue on my journey," Quinn said, conscious that the interruption was futile.

"The fort from which you come is short of supplies," Pawnee said softly. "All Winter they have waited for the snows to melt."

Quinn nodded. It was true. There was grumbling and there was short rations at the Yankee outpost.

"Supplies are on their way now," Quinn said. "The bull-freight team should arrive within a week."

"Or less than that, maybe," Pawnee Pondrel corrected. "And they have wisely chosen to come by Pawnee Pondrel's way

station. A soldier from your fort will meet them here. He should arrive tonight."

Quinn glanced apprehensively at the door, and when he turned back Pawnee's eyes were lit with the sparked intensity of rifle flints.

"I will not betray you," Pawnee said slyly. "But as I have said, you will earn the clothes you wear. Tomorrow you will take the soldier's place."

Quinn gripped his red-knuckled hands behind his back. Pawnee Pondrel spoke in riddles.

"I have urgent business of my own," Quinn said impatiently. "I will pay you well and be on my way."

"This will take but a little of your time, and is of more value to me than your money," Pawnee said throatily. "The soldier comes as a guide to lead the freighters back to the fort. You will take his place and lead them instead to the needles of the Bad Lands where Chief Yellow Horse of the Oglalas will be waiting."

Pawnee's round fingers stretched hard against the food-crusted table top.

"I have already accepted Yellow Horse's silver for the supplies that you will deliver. But guard yourself well against treacherous thoughts. Many of the freighters of the train are in my hire. When you return, you will have earned the clothes to continue your escape."

"Including a hat to fit the scalp line of my head," Quinn said grimly.

Pawnee laughed throatily. "The Galvanized Yankee is clever. The wise man always looks after himself. But there will be no danger."

PAWNEE leaned forward. "I will provide you a map of the place where the Oglala trap is set. It is a place where the needles stand apart like the teeth of a jackal's mouth. As you approach, you can leave the column to go on, pretending to scout the back trail. You can be miles away when Yellow Horse strikes."

Quinn rubbed his back against the blackened stones of the fireplace, his

Pawnee Pondrel was murderously adept with a knife or any other weapon.

thoughts grim. Destiny; tough destiny.

"Is an Oglala Sioux trap the normal reward you provide your employees?" he questioned acidly.

Pawnee Pondrel frowned darkly. "Arrangements have been made for the safety of the freighters in my hire."

"But if the freighters work for you, why do they need a guide?" Quinn asked. "It would be simple for them to deliver the supplies to Yellow Horse instead of to the fort."

"I said many of the freighters are in my hire," Pawnee corrected, but not *all* of them. The others we need to drive the teams. Their simple minds might become suspicious unless there is the assurance of a soldier guide at the head of the column."

"How many of the freighters work for you?" Quinn asked crisply.

"Half, less than half, more than half, maybe," Pawnee said evasively.

"And how am I to know who the men are who work for you, and who are the unsuspecting victims for Yellow Horse's trap?"

"That you will not know," Pawnee said with decisive cunning. "If thoughts of treachery should crease your thoughts, it will be difficult for you to execute your plans since you will not know who is your friend and who is your enemy."

"You speak as though I have no choice but to accept your offer," Quinn said sharply.

Pawnee Pondrel rolled his large head with owlish solemnity.

"Now that you know the fullness of the plan, you have no choice," Pawnee said bluntly.

Quinn hesitated stubbornly. There was no taste in him for shedding the blood of innocent men—and there was much impatience. It was already May in 1865, and the war that had started as if only yesterday was already in its fifth year. He had been a prisoner for almost a year to the day—ever since he had been captured during the Battle of the Wilderness, and there was much need for him in the Southland.

Up at the Yankee outpost they said the North was winning, but one did not need to believe the Yankee lies. Every day that the war continued there was hope for the South, for discontent was rife throughout Northern cities.

"When Yellow Horse has the ammunition and supplies of the bull-freight train he will fall upon the Yankee outpost and erase it from the earth," Pawnee Pondrel said tonelessly. "It would be a present for your Southern generals if you could tell them that your hand caused the fall of even one Yankee outpost."

Quinn continued to rub his back against the warmth of the fireplace while he tried to see beyond the inscrutability of Pawnee Pondrel's rodent eyes. Yes, the destruction of even one lonely Yankee outpost would aid the Southland. Yet, in imagination, Quinn saw the scalped and mutilated bodies of wagon freighters, face down on a cloud-rimmed plain.

Quinn's thoughts stiffened rebelliously. That's what war was—on the battlelines or in the harassment of a Northern fort. And war was fought with cannon and mangled bodies and lies and broken promises wherever it was found.

"When you return," Pawnee Pondrel said again, softly, as though reading his thoughts, "you will have earned the clothes that you will wear to freedom."

"And you will have earned the silver of Yellow Horse that you will jingle in your pocket," Quinn said wryly.

"I will have earned more," Pawnee Pondrel said. "When Chief Yellow Horse destroys the outpost, the emigrant wagons will no longer circle north for the protection of the fort. The ruts of the trail past Pawnee Pondrel's way station will no longer be filled with drifting dust."

WHEN there was a knock on the way station door, Quinn thrust his boot toe into Pawnee Pondrel's cupped hands, and then while Pawnee lifted as though he were a feather of lightness, Quinn pulled himself into the musty-smelling loft just above the table.

Through splinter-edged cracks in the floor, Quinn listened to the deep voices

Pawnee whammed the rifle butt joltingly against Quinn's chin.

below. It was Sergeant Blakely Campbell who had been sent down to guide the bull-freight teams to the fort.

Quinn saw the back of the sergeant's sandy head as he seated himself at the table, and then moments later the blurred motion of Pawnee Pondrel's clublike arm cast a shadow against the ceiling. Sergeant Campbell's head struck the table violently from the impact of Pawnee's gun butt.

Quinn dropped from the loft, landing

on his toes. The sergeant's head was lolled against the table top with his arms flung limply forward. There was an egg-sized lump on his skull, and blood flecks around his broken teeth where his mouth had smashed against the table.

"Is he . . . dead?" Quinn questioned.

"Only inconvenienced," Pawnee said mirthlessly.

"Will you kill him now?" Quinn asked wryly.

He looked down at the slumped blue-clad body. This was the enemy, but even Quinn had to admit that Sergeant Blakely Campbell had treated the men at the outpost fairly. Both the Northerners and Galvanized Yankees had found justice in his orders. There had never been a taunt on the sergeant's tongue for men whose great difference lay in the fact that their loyalties were with the Southland. Under different circumstances, Quinn acknowledged that he would have valued the sandy-haired sergeant's friendship.

"We will not kill him here," Pawnee said. "It would be wise to have his body found among the freighters. We will tie him well and hide him in one of the wagons."

DURING the grayness of the dawn, Sergeant Campbell's bound and gagged body was slipped into one of the wagons that had arrived during the night.

Quinn milled around among the drivers, trying to determine from their faces and in the manner with which they conversed with Pawnee Pondrel who his hirelings were, but there was little to be gained. The men looked much alike, with leathery seamed faces and bone-weary listlessness to their walk.

And there were other distractions. The Civil War, they said, was over. The South had surrendered!

Quinn listened to a gangly freighter.

"Chased the Johnny Rebs plumb out of Richmond, and General Lee surrendered at some place or other called Ap-po-mattox Court House."

"When was this?" Quinn snapped.

"Nigh onto a month ago, I reckon," the freighter said. "Long 'bout the first week of April."

"It's not true," Quinn said heatedly. "General Lee would never surrender his sword."

Quinn grew red-faced under the steady gaze of the freighter.

"You sound like one of them Galvanized Yanks," the freighter drawled.

"I make no secret of it," Quinn said defiantly.

"Me, I might be called one of them Galvanized Yanks, too," the freighter said, "if you can count a Missouri man a Johnny Reb."

The freighter looked quizzically at Quinn.

"Way I figure it, a man ain't got much choice—and now that the war's over and done, there's some things best forgotten. We're one country again and growin' bigger, and there'll be work to do now that the fightin's over."

Now that the fightin's over. The words rankled inside Quinn as though a blacksnake whip had circled his heart. He looked down at the blue dustiness of his uniform. Some men might believe that the war was at an end, but a true Southerner knew better. There would be fighting without end until victory was assured. The uniform of Ohio would never be the uniform of Georgia, not as long as Southern swords could be hidden away until time to strike anew. He would be needed now more than ever.

AT the head of the plodding column, Quinn surveyed the flat barrenness of the treeless plain while the midday sun swam in the cauldron of the heavens overhead.

Pawnee Pondrel had supplied a horse, and Quinn twisted in the saddle, looking back along the long column, while the edges of the crude map that Pawnee had supplied him rasped against his pocket.

Yesterday the destruction of a Yankee outpost had seemed a blow for the Confederacy, but today—if what the freighters said was true—Quinn wasn't so certain.

The armies of the South would be broken up. It would require days, even

months, to reorganize.

Quinn weighed the prospects. During the Civil War, the Indian tribes of the Northwest had savagely ridden the plains and there had been much talk that as soon as the war ended, the frontier forts would be more heavily garrisoned, and that new forts would be built.

Let the Yankees maintain their forts and send their soldiers to the frontier. When the South was ready to strike again, the Northern regiments would be many marching days away. The war could be quick, with Northern cities overrun. It would be better now to deliver the supplies to Major Ambrose Amberly at the Yankee outpost.

Quinn thought again of the stocky major, who at times seemed more like a Southern gentleman than a damn' Yankee West Pointer—and of Sergeant Blakely Campbell whose lank frame was trussed and gagged in one of the jolting wagons.

It had been Sergeant Campbell's suggestion to order the bolts of heavy muslin that filled one of the wagons, and Major Amberly had readily agreed. The Yankee fort was built on the treeless Dakota plains and all the timber that could be secured had been needed for the palisade walls that surrounded it.

The buildings of the outpost—the officers' quarters as well as the barracks and stables—were made of sod and the crumbling walls and roofs caused much discomfort during the rainy seasons. By lining the inside of the walls and the ceilings with muslin, after the fashion of the prairie settlers, it was felt that cleaner and more pleasant quarters would be provided.

Quinn glanced at the wagon that contained the long bolts of muslin. If the driver of it were a friend and not one of Pawnee Pondrel's hirelings, the muslin would be useful.

Throughout the day, Quinn pondered the problem. There had to be some way of sifting out the innocent victims of the Oglala ambush from Pawnee Pondrel's renegades.

The next morning he studied the faces and the movements of the drivers as they swung into line. The load of muslin was far back in the line. Too far to be of any value.

A second and third morning, Quinn observed the freighters as they broke camp, until finally he was satisfied with what he found. The freighter who bullwhacked the muslin load was now sixth in the lineup.

A stiff wind blew down a prairie slope and already the needles of the Bad Lands were like a mist in the distance. If the freighters continued on they would reach Chief Yellow Horse's trap in the afternoon.

Confidently, Quinn rode back to the lead wagon.

"You're being led into an Oglala Sioux trap," Quinn said directly, watching the driver's eyes.

"What are you saying, man?" The driver spat forcefully. "You're the one that's leading us."

Quinn explained the reason that the freight wagons had been led almost to the edge of the Bad Lands.

"Looks like the best thing to do is turn back," the driver said, still suspicious.

"It's not that easy," Quinn explained. "There are men further back in line who work for Pawnee Pondrel. Wait until you get a signal and then swing your wagon off in a circle from the line of march. Have your gun handy. I think we will be able to tell who Pawnee's henchmen are."

To the rest of the drivers in the lead of the column, Quinn gave the same instructions, until finally he reached the muslin-loaded wagon.

Anxiously, Quinn studied the bullwhacker's leathery face.

"You're being led into an Oglala Sioux trap," Quinn said, and knew from the instant alarm in the man's face that he was a friend.

Quinn explained his plan.

"Get into your wagon," he ordered briefly, "and when we reach the top of this slope where the wind blows strong, let out bolts of muslin so that they flow

(Continued on page 85)

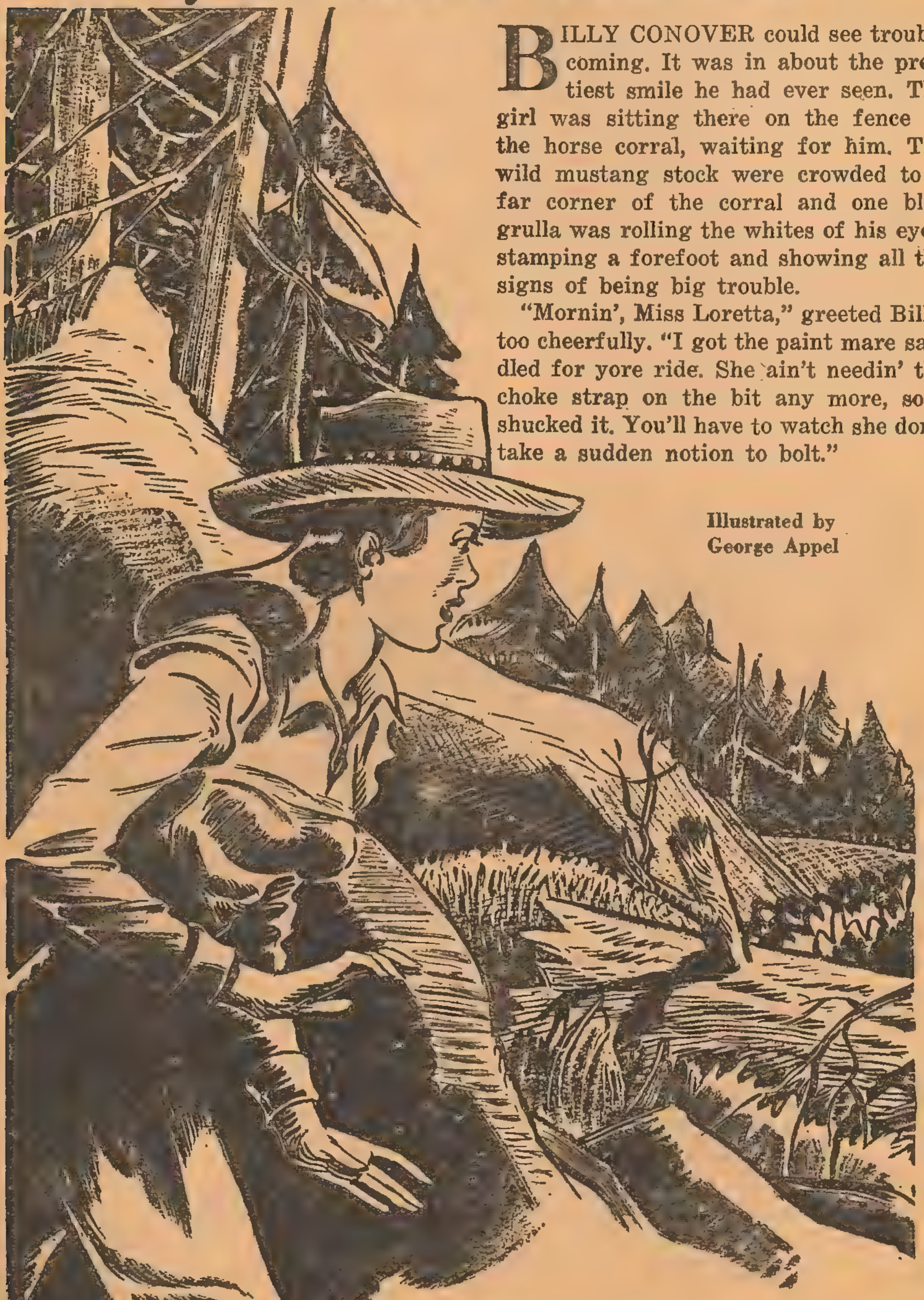
HORSE GENTLER

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

BILLY CONOVER could see trouble coming. It was in about the prettiest smile he had ever seen. The girl was sitting there on the fence of the horse corral, waiting for him. The wild mustang stock were crowded to a far corner of the corral and one blue grulla was rolling the whites of his eyes, stamping a forefoot and showing all the signs of being big trouble.

"Mornin', Miss Loretta," greeted Billy, too cheerfully. "I got the paint mare saddled for yore ride. She ain't needin' the choke strap on the bit any more, so I shucked it. You'll have to watch she don't take a sudden notion to bolt."

Illustrated by
George Appel



She watched as a jawbone broke under smashing knuckles in the grim battle.

Bronc-buster Billy Conover plumb couldn't decide which was his orneriest problem—facing that kill-crazy ramrod on the 77 Ranch, or the young she-hellion who thought she rodded it, or a vexed grizzly bear, but he found out by trying all three!

Loretta stretched one slim, perfect leg lazily in Billy's direction and slapped the curve of her riding boot with the rawhide crop. Billy partly turned his eyes away. He got nerve at last to bring his eyes up to her pretty face. He tried to ignore the scornful smile playing over her red mouth.

"How come, hoss-rassler, you're pickin' out a nag for me 'thout my say-so?" she said, loudly enough to be heard clear over to the bunkhouse. Several of the waddies over there perked up. "I've a notion I'm wantin' you should bust that grulla if you're all through talkin' in his ear. An' if you think he's properly busted, I'm takin' him."

The rawhide crop pointed directly at Billy Conover.

"No, he aint," said Billy thoughtfully.

"But I reckon I won't do any bustin' him. Y'see, Miss Loretta, he's been gentled to keep the spirit in him. The paint mare's over on the hitch rack."

Out of the corner of his eye Billy saw Jim Masters striding from the bunkhouse toward the corral. No doubt he had heard Loretta's hot words. Masters usually wore two .45s and carried a quirt with a loaded butt that could knock down a yearling.

Masters was a good-looking, black-eyed hombre, but he had a small mouth. Billy never liked men with small mouths. Masters had a mind that went with that kind of mouth. He was "Ma" Brooks' ramrod on the 77 spread. Billy Conover had seen that he was more than popular with the willful Loretta.

"You're the kind of a yellow ranny I imagined you'd be," said Loretta challengingly. "I'm makin' it an order that you bust that grulla stallion."

"No'm, I ain't," said Conover flatly but quietly. "Y'see, Miss Loretta, a hoss has temper'ment. One like that 'specially. Reckon I could make 'im tote a hull an' answer a rein, but I'm gentlin' 'im for you; an' I had it in mind that he was to be yore hoss."

"What in time's all this ruckus?" clipped out Masters, one-handing himself over the top rail of the corral. "Heard yuh sayin' yuh wa'ant takin' Miss Loretta's order, Conover! Well, mebbe so yuh'll be takin' mine? I'm still ramroddin' the seven-seven this mornin'!"

"Ain't nowise argyfyin' that point," said Conover cheerfully. "But it was agreed I was to have my way 'bout these grullas. Seems as how some of 'em have been ruined in the past. Don't 'low any of these jugheads will be walkin' 'round with drooping heads."

"Slap a hull on that stallion, an' climb into it if you ain't scared, hoss-rassler!" snapped Loretta. "I've still got somethin' to say as to how the seven-seven hosses are to be busted!"

CONOVER'S cool, gray eyes still smiled at Loretta. Conover was an even six feet, but Masters was some taller. And the irate ramrod of the seven-seven was close to him.

"Bustin' that stallion takes a say-so from Ma Brooks herself," said Conover. "The paint's waitin' for yuh, Miss Loretta."

"Why, you locoed saddle bum!" cried out the girl. "I'll give you a lesson in who's who—"

Her riding whip slashed out and its lash cut across Conovers cheek. A red welt showed almost instantly and white spots appeared at the corners of his broad mouth. One hand shot up, trapped the whip, and the surprised girl tumbled from the fence.

Conover caught her in his powerful arms. For an instant he was acutely aware of her pulsating bosom pressed to his sweat-soaked shirt. Then Loretta lifted her hands and gouged some of the skin from his square jaw.

He set her on her feet with a movement that jolted her and caused her white teeth to click together.

"You're a spoiled, oversized child, Miss Loretta," he said, and his tone was still quiet. "I reckon it's you needs bustin' more than the blue grulla that don't nowise understand."

"Why, damn yuh!" mouthed Masters. "If yuh was a man an' wore irons, I'd salivate yuh here an now! But seein' yuh ain't, I'll see to it yuh hain't throwin' out no more insults!'

Loretta was open-mouthed, her lips parted as she tried to find words. Practically nobody had ever attempted to put a curb on her free-ranging or her smiling way of bossing the 77. Nobody whatever until this minute had ever told her the truth or set her upon her feet with a jolt.

Conover saw Masters' quirt reversed and the loaded butt of it swinging for his face. It would have smashed out his teeth, but Conover moved his head back only a few inches. The quirt whistled viciously past a bare inch from his mouth. Its swing carried Masters a little off balance.

Conover noticed that Loretta's blue eyes were wide and she was staring at

him as if he were some new pilgrim she had never seen before. But he had no time for the girl now.

Her riding whip slashed out and its lash cut across Conover's cheek, raising a big red welt.

"By all hell! I'll pulverize yore yeller carcass!" Masters' black eyes were blazing with hate now. He threw the heavy-butted quirt from him and swung back, the calloused fists coming up.

"If yuh was only totin' a hogleg, I'd drill yuh perm'nent!" grated Masters. "Seein' yuh're skeered of shootin' irons, I'll give yuh what for 'thout resortin' to 'em!"

Masters started a long, low haymaker for Conover's chin. He meant it to be a sockdolger! And it would have been. Conover's hands were still open and they hung at his side. Again he rolled his head a little and the bunched knuckles flew by, carrying the bellowing ramrod with his long arm.

"Too yellow to even take 'im up," said Loretta's icy voice behind him. "I can see why Ma Brooks picked you to wrangle hosses. The same which you make out you're doin' by goin' whisperin' in their

ears." Contempt was on her features.

"Yuh dodgin skunk!" howled Masters now.

The angry ramrod backed off as if he were sighting to make sure he would land this time. Loretta removed her slim figure to one side. A dozen waddies were coming over from the bunkhouse. Masters' temper was notorious. He had been known to jump on a downed hombre with his boots and spurs.

One of the waddies said: "I was a-feared that hoss-gentler would be a burr under Jim's saddle. Mrs. Brooks herself hired him an' that rubbed Jim's fur the wrong way."

"Give it to 'im, Jim!" cried out Loretta. "Nobody on the seven-seven or anywhere else ever insulted me before."

"Hain't so shore 'bout the insultin' part o' it," grunted one of the older waddies. "'Pears to me that young scalawag of a hoss gentler told 'er suthin she's had comin' for quite a spell. She's been gettin' too big for her pants."

JIM MASTERS dug the toes of his boots into the dust of the horse corral. The big ramrod was fairly frothing at the mouth. He was setting himself to wipe out this sleek, fight-ducking hoss-tender in the next rush. His big fingers clenched and unclenched.

"If yuh're half a man, yuh'll put up yore paws!" he howled.

Conover turned slowly, facing the ramrod. Masters seemed to paw the ground with his boots as he lowered his head for a lunge at his lighter enemy. It seemed to the awe-stricken punchers that the hoss-tender would be smashed into the nearby post of the corral fence.

If anyone had been watching Loretta's blue eyes at the minute, he might have seen a funny, questioning look come into them. As if suddenly she had lost her desire to have the hoss-gentler annihilated.

Masters was blowing at the nostrils, much like a mad bull as he hurled his better than two hundred pounds of weight upon the hoss-tender. None of the punchers saw how Conover did it. Both of Masters' fists smashed at Conover's head and both somehow missed.

It might have been that Conover stuck out a foot. Anyway, the ramrod's head was down and his rush hurled him past Conover. There was a sickening impact of bone upon wood. Masters' thick skull hit the corral post and he went backward as if a mule had kicked him in the teeth.

Blood seeped from Masters' ears and nose and his mop of hair was sogged with it where it ran into the corral dust.

"Why you back-kicking coward!" almost screamed Loretta at Conover. "You done that to Jim."

Loretta was down on her knees, wiping the blood from the insensible ramrod with her silk handkerchief.

"By cracky!" grunted the oldest waddy. "Yuh see it? That dang' hoss-tender never moved, an' he hain't put up his hands as yet!"

"'Cause why? 'Cause he's yeller! He wouldn't bust that grulla cayuse for Miss Loretta!" A waddy said this and it was the general opinion of the others.

Conover said: "Sorry, Miss Loretta."

"I'll still see that you saddle an' bust that grulla stallion, hoss-nurse!" blazed the girl.

"Don't yuh pay her no mind, Billy Conover," spoke a grim, old voice from the corral fence. "She's a right pert girl, but I'm still bossin' the seven-seven. I told yuh to break them grullas yore own way. We've had too many busted an' killed out among the rocks by those rannies. Git to yore hosses, all yuh, an' see if yuh kin drive some yearlin' beef 'thout fallin' off!"

A bulky woman with a face like a leathery cartoon, and twinkling eyes looked through the fourth and fifth rail of the corral, because she couldn't see over its top.

The 77 waddies make a quick sashay back for the bunkhouse and the stables. When old "Ma" Brooks spoke like that, she meant light a shuck and they lit it. She had come waddling close to the corral while Masters was staging his quirt and fist ruckus.

"What in all sand's happened t' Jim?"

said Ma Brooks. "Eat some grub that disagreed with 'im?"

"Granny!" cried out Loretta. "This—this hoss-whisperer, he's too yellow to fight! An' he said I was a spoiled child, an' needed bustin' worse'n a hoss! Jim took up for me, an'—"

"For a feller who won't fight, Loretta, Billy Conover seems to have done right smart," chuckled Ma Brooks. "As for yuh needin' bustin', don't know's he didn't call a spade a spade. Yuh git along t' the house or ride that paint hoss like Billy Conover tol' yuh. I'm thinkin' Jim Masters is big enough to wipe the blood off'n his own nose."

Conover watched Loretta go lightly and angrily over the corral bars. The springiness in her curved body got him somehow. He might be a hoss-gentler, and he didn't know much about women critters, but he was willing to try one job of busting right there.

Under Ma Brooks' lashing tongue, Jim Masters shook the dust out of his eyes and shambled off to the bunkhouse. His muttering had murder in it and he cocked an eye backward at Conover.

Loretta passed the saddled pinto with a flirt of her head. Old Ma Brooks grinned at Billy Conover.

"Yup," she smiled, "that pert girl would take some bustin' Billy. Yuh go right ahead the way yuh started with them grullas."

Masters' thick skull hit the corral post and he went backward as if a mule had kicked him in the teeth.

A YELLOW half moon lay over the Wild Horse range. Conover knew the silence at the chuck table that night wasn't on account of the moon. A dozen riders were in and they were watching for Conover to buckle on the pair of six-guns with the inlaid silver butts they knew were stowed under his bunk.

Because of a swollen nose and a pair of black eyes, Masters did not appear at the regular chuck table. He often ate with Ma Brooks and Loretta at the big house. He wasn't there tonight though. When Conover went out without his guns, the waddies shook their heads and looked sad.

"Cain't figger it no ways but what he's yeller," opined one of the waddies.

"Still 'tain't him moseyin' 'round with a busted nose and missin' his supper," said the oldest puncher.

It was up in the green bush where it was thick that Conover paused abruptly and listened. He couldn't hear the words but the tone was unmistakable. Suddenly he saw a flurry of white.

Loretta was up there with Jim Masters' arms around her. Conover tried to figure out why it made him a little sick.

No doubt Masters was an old hand around here and he was good-looking. Why should he care if Masters spread his loop for the spoiled darling of the seven-seven?

Conover had no intention of spying. But the girl's sighs were audible. Then he heard Loretta cry out: "No, Jim. No!"

In spite of himself, Conover's long-fingered hands were tight in a clench. "I said I wouldn't," he grated under his breath; "but there's just so much!"

His tightened hands slowly unclenched at that. For Loretta was running lightly past him. She didn't see Conover and he was glad of it.

Conover came silently back to the ranchhouse yard. He circled and took some time about it. As he approached the main house, a terrible snarling and growling broke out. He heard Ma Brooks calling out: "Down, Tiger. Easy, Trump!"

"Git them damn' houn's offen me!" came a hoarse voice. "One o' 'em chawed a piece outen my chaps an' 'tother went for my gullet! Git 'em off!"

It was Jim Masters.

Ma Brooks' grim voice replied.

"Shucks an' pother, Jim! That Trump ain't got a tooth in his head, an' Tiger was jest playin'! Git down offen that wagon! You ain't hurt none! Too bad yuh ain't got yer quirt, like yuh was honin' to use on Conover this mornin'!"

Conover smiled grimly. He heard Masters climbing off something and Ma Brooks leading the dogs back to their kennel. They were a part of her bear-hunting pack and Conover had learned in a couple of weeks that Ma Brooks thought about as much of those hounds as she did of her granddaughter.

Conover was legging it toward the bunkhouse when Ma Brooks' huge figure loomed up beside him. She was chuckling.

"Reckon a hoss-nurse could spare me a few minutes?" she asked in a cheerful tone. "Got suthin' I'm honin' t' say to yuh, Billy Conover."

MA BROOKS' den was like a display of the Hudson Bay Fur Company. She had some of the finest pelts the northern Montana winter ever produced. But mostly the floor and walls were decorated with bear hides. Big and little black, and several gray-snouted grizzlies proved Ma Brooks could use any one of the several high-calibered rifles on racks above the yawning fireplace with its blaze of resin pine.

"Reckon yuh've diskivered a woman critter on the place what ain't ever goin' t' be gentled by whisperin' in her ears," said Ma Brooks, her eyes as bright as blue agate in her wrinkled face. "Yuh happened to a heap o' accidental luck t'day, Conover."

Conover grinned.

"Some wild stock ain't worth nary the time nor the patience t' waste yore breath on," he said slowly. "A busted woman critter's wuss than a hoss. About today, hombres like Jim Masters is allus due to happen t' accidents. I opine you had other reasons for palaverin', Ma Brooks?"

Ma Brooks arose and seemed to be busy smoothing the bristly fur of a gray-snouted grizzly, a huge fellow, whose fur hung over the fireplace.

"That un was plumb bad medicine, Conover," she said. And then she took down a corncob pipe, tamped some long cut into it and set it alight with a brand from the fire. "Yup. He was bad. If'n I hadn't known the critters wouldn't touch nobody that had the sense t' lay down, shet their eyes and not even breathe, I reckon he'd done for me, Conover. Y'see my rifle jammed, an' I was only lucky that it happened 'fore I nipped him with lead."

"You mean, Ma Brooks, you flattened out, shut yore eyes an' let that grizzly come onto you?" said Conover unbelievingly.

She stated:

"Yup. Thet's what I done. He nosed 'round, got all puzzled and moseyed off through the berries. I got the jam out'n Old Betsy pronto and whanged his spine plumb in two parts jest back o' his brain."

"That takes guts, Ma Brooks."

"Fiddlesticks an' pother, Billy Conover! Takes a mite o' common sense. Hain't no unwounded animal, 'ceptin' a

she bear with cubs, that'll do any clawin' if'n yuh don't start the ruckus. Varmints all fight 'cause they're skeered, hurt, or are lookin' arter their young uns."

Conover rolled a quirly with one hand and got a brand to light it. Mrs. Brooks studied his broad, straight back and his slim hips that moved him with the smoothness of a cat.

"Reckon yuh could've whopped Jim Masters, Conover?"

"'Fraid so, Ma Brooks," he grinned. "'Pears he's right smart in favor with Loretta. She is a right pert critter, ma'am."

He rubbed a little ruefully at the welt still across his cheek. He added, "'Course you know she's figgerin' on hitchin' up with yore ramrod. Tain't a bad match."

"Prob'bly they'd make a team," said Ma Brooks slowly. "But he ain't the kind t' make her pull her share o' the load. I've had other idees, Conover. Wa'nt it one o' yore pa's ideas t' have yuh git hitched an' come back t' take a bossin' intrust in the Cross-D spread? An' wa'nt he an' Loretta's pa two of the closest pards what ever rode the Wild Horse hogbacks in the old days?"

Once more Conover grinned but he didn't have his heart in it this time.

"'Fraid 'twas," he said laconically. "But he ain't never seen what Tom Budd sired, an' he hadn't figgered nowise I'd start off with takin' a lick from a ridin' stock at her hands. 'Sides that, Ma Brooks, the word's pretty well gone around how yeller I turned out to be today when Masters had his accident."

"Shucks an' pother, Conover!" snapped Ma Brooks. Then she sat staring into the fire a long time. Her bright eyes went to the old, but polished .40-50 rifle over the fireplace.

"Reckon it's about time to be pickin' blueberries over to the big mountain," she said. "S'pose yuh could take a day off whisperin' t' them dumb grullas an' be totin' a pack fer me t'morrow, Conover? Ain't nigh so spry as I useter be."

"Shore admire the chance, Ma Brooks," said Conover. "Anyway it'll get me away a day from the bunkhouse palaverin' when they think I ain't listenin'."

Above the girl there was a huge grizzly. Loretta acted paralyzed.

LORETTA BUDD wore a short, climbing skirt. She walked windfalls, which are masses of down trees with usually one that crosses the others like a bridge. Toting Ma Brooks' heavy pack, Billy Conover rucked through the underbrush below. So he had glimpses of Loretta up above in the different windfalls.

Jim Masters was one of the blueberry-

ing party of four. The way Ma Brooks shagged through the toughest going on big mountain, it came to Conover it was dang doubtful about her not still being as spry as she used to be.

"She could o' toted this pack easier than me," he muttered. "An' that ain't what's in the wind."

The bright blue eyes of Loretta scorned the lowly and humbled horse-gentler. She laughed with Jim Masters. The blacked-eyed ramrod was having his day. Once on a high log, he saw Masters take her in his arms and kiss her.

Ma Brooks slogged on. "Trout stream up ahead," she said. "We git us a mess for dinner, an' then we git inter the berries. Billy Conover, yuh keep an' eye on that pack o' mine."

Ma Brooks was toting her .40-50 rifle. The trout were caught, and Loretta kept close to Jim Masters. Conover found himself having chills and fever. Damn the girl! She was a cantankerous, spoiled brat and she ought to have her pants warmed up by someone's good hard palm!

And Conover wanted to walk over and smash Masters, and give the filly for once the kind of kiss he knew how to give a woman!

They cleaned up the mess of trout. Ma Brooks gathered the remnants and wrapped them in an old newspaper.

"I'm gittin' up on that shelf an' find some blueberries," she announced. "The rest o' yuh have a time yore own way."

She added then, "An' keep yore peepers open for grizzlies. They come down the mountain for blueberries 'bout this season. If'n yuh see one, don't go whangin' away at 'im with yore .45's. Yuh might as well use a popgun as one o' them things on a grizzly."

Conover grinned a little. He wasn't toting any weapon. Jim Masters was, as usual, wearing his six-guns. Ma Brooks slogged up the hill with her rifle and her package of cooked trout leavings.

Loretta had one long look at Conover's gray eyes and he smiled a little. She took Master's arm and said, "Let's cross over that big windfall where the air's some better."

The black eyes of Masters cornered on Conover. All day it had seemed the 77 ramrod had been hoping to get Conover alone where they might have it out, toe to toe. Conover had seemed deliberately to avoid an open encounter.

Masters shoved close to him.

"Yuh're still settlin' with me for yest'day!" grunted Masters.

"If you're meanin' fist or gun-fightin', you're wrong, Masters," said Conover, loud enough for Loretta to hear.

Contempt blazed in Loretta's blue eyes.

"Never thought there'd ever be anything but a man hired on the seven-seven," she drawled. "C'mon, Jim, let's cross the windfall."

Conover thought of the night before, and damned if he didn't find himself wondering what it would feel like to have the girl put her arms around him and kiss him.

He could still feel the pressure of her soft body against him as she had fallen off the corral fence.

"Git some sense, Conover," he muttered to himself. "You're all yeller as far as she's concerned. So—"

A shrill scream of fear snapped him out of his half doze and his day dream.

"Jim! He's comin' this way! Please, Jim! Help me!"

The tangle of down trees and brush in the windfall was crossed by a single, old spruce log nearly two hundred feet in length. Masters and Loretta had crossed the tricky bridge when they had left Conover.

CONOVER heaved himself onto the end of the log bridge with the lithe movement of a cougar. From here he could see Loretta's bright woolen skirt against a gray patch of rocks beyond the opposite end of the windfall. She was standing still, as if frozen.

Above the girl, perhaps another hundred feet, a huge animal with a coat of dirty gray was moving slowly among the rocks. As Conover sighted Loretta, the biggest grizzly bear he had ever seen slowly reared to his hindfeet.

"Keep still, Loretta!" yelled Conover.

"That fella's peaceable! Don't stir 'im up!"

For Conover saw that the grizzly undoubtedly had been eating blueberries, and for the moment was no more than curious over the sound of the girl's voice so near him. At the sound of Conover's voice the ugly snout of the grizzly took in the cause of the new disturbance.

"Don't move, Loretta!" shouted Conover.

The bear and the girl remained for several seconds as motionless as statues, the girl paralyzed by fear, the bear well fed on berries and not yet aroused to anger. Conover was sure that if Loretta didn't move, the grizzly would shuffle away.

But where was Jim Masters?

Conover started across the spruce log. Although unarmed, he hoped to reach the girl among the rocks and prevent her making some foolish move. He scanned all of the bluebrry patch beyond the windfall, hoping that Ma Brooks might be somewhere close with her deadly .40-50 rifle. She was not in sight.

Then there was a quick crashing in the brush. Jim Masters scrambled up onto the spruce log a short distance from Loretta, and facing Conover. Even when Masters came toward him, balancing on the log, almost running, Conover could hardly realize that the ramrod of the 77 was fleeing from the grizzly, deserting the girl in his own fear of the bear.

"Go back!" grated Conover. "You yeller coyote! Help Loretta onto the log 'fore that bear gets ructious!"

But Masters' fear was too great to heed. The ramrod and the horse-gentler were almost abruptly facing each other on the log.

"Fer gosh sakes, Conover!" blurted out Masters. "It's a big grizzly, an' he's mad! He'll be comin' right up onto this stick arter me!"

Loretta screamed again. Conover saw the grizzly begin to circle, still undecided whether to investigate or to drop on all fours and shuffle away. There was a thick ruck of furze, scrub pine, and rhododendron bushes between the girl and the bear. But it wouldn't deter a grizzly.

"Oh, Jim! Please come back for me!"

At this cry, Masters hesitated for the fraction of a second. He saw then that the grizzly was moving slowly toward Loretta, and he made faster time across the log toward Conover. He was dangling one of his six-guns in his hand, but he seemed powerless to fire it.

"He's coming for me, Jim! Good heavens! Do something!"

Conover saw Loretta start to run then. What was it Ma Brooks had told him? Never run from a wild animal, never wound one and never start a fight.

"Stay where you are, Loretta!" yelled Conover. "Lie down!"

But Loretta couldn't seem to hear. Her lithe body darted among thorny bushes. The spikes ripped some of her clothing.

Conover might have thought of the whip welt across his cheek but he didn't. For the grizzly was snuffling now and smashing down small pines and bushes as if they were matchwood. Conover was near Masters when the scared, fleeing ramrod lifted a .45 to send a useless bullet into the grizzly.

"Dally it, you damn' fool!" shouted Conover.

Then he hit Masters for the first time. It was a beautiful punch and timed to the instant to cross Masters' jaw. It brought the ramrod around, his black eyes sunken with fear.

"Lemme go, yuh damn' hoss-nurse!" he squawked, and his .45 came into line with Conover's body. "Git out'n my way or I'll fill yuh plumb full o' lead!"

Conover's right hand shot out. It trapped the gun and jerked Masters toward him on the big log.

"Shoot an' be damned!" said Conover harshly, and the gun did flame, burning along his arm. "Now take it, you sidewinder!"

Toe to toe, on the narrow space of the log, they slugged it out. Masters was driven by fear and he fought like a cornered rat. Below them, Loretta was still screaming, running through the brush.

Even then, her blue eyes turned curi-

ously, imploringly to the two men up on the windfall log. Conover got Masters. He felt a jawbone break under his smashing knuckles and Masters hurtled through the air.

Then Masters was running, crashing away through the brush. His yells of fear floated back. It puzzled the grizzly enough that he halted and reared up far enough to see better what these funny human animals were doing. Conover looked down into the imploring, oval face of Loretta.

"Please, Billy Conover!" Her voice floated up to him.

He could hear Masters hit and start running away in the brush. The ramrod who climbed a wagon for dogs wasn't having any part of a grizzly, girl or no girl. Conover jumped. He landed beside Loretta.

The shuffling snort of the grizzly was close. A sentence was running through his mind.

"If yuh got the guts to lie down an' close yore eyes—"

"Lie down!" he snapped at Loretta. "An' shut yore eyes an' keep still!"

SHE only stared at him, her body trembling. The bushes crashed close to them. He uttered a short oath and then hit her. Smacked her solidly on her perky, uptilted chin.

Her limpid blue eyes accused him as she fell, and they closed. He could almost feel the hot breath of the killer grizzly. He had lost all faith now in Ma Brooks' loco philosophy. But there was nothing else he could do.

Damned if it wasn't tough lying still. And it wasn't the arrival and the sniffing around of that overgrown grizzly either. For Loretta was trying to get away from him and he had all he could do to hold her still.

All at once the bear's fetid breath was on the back of Conover's neck. Loretta's arms started to creep around his neck. This wasn't according to the rules laid down by Ma Brooks. Conover could almost feel the bear's terrible claws and fangs tearing into his back. Then all at once the brush crackled a little distance away.

That grizzly had satisfied his curiosity. These humans that fell down and played dead on him weren't worth his time. The giant grizzly went back to his blueberries.

Loretta sat up and Conover's arms were around her. Her eyes went to his face and she said: "Oh, Billy Conover. I'm ashamed of the way I acted to you. I—"

The bear was farther away now. In the distance Jim Masters could be heard making tracks for safety. Conover kissed the red lips that had scorned him.

"I love you, you impossible brat!" he got out.

"Great heavens!" gasped Loretta, seeing that her clothes were almost in tatters. "I must find some clothes!"

"Why?" asked Billy Conover with a grin, and he kissed her this time in a manner that melted her to him, made her forget all of the Jim Masters and all the grizzly bears on big mountains.

Loretta suddenly pushed him away.

"Say, you Billy Conover!" she blazed. "You don't believe in the busting of hosses! You gentle 'em! Seems as if you have gentled that grizzly! But me? You bust me—in the chin!"

"Some fillies have t' be busted." Conover grinned. "They ain't no other way."

But his next kiss was gentle enough.

FAR up on the hill, Ma Brooks was behind a huge rock. She smiled with her bright eyes and put down the rifle.

"Billy Conover's father made it tough for him," she said. "He kills an hombre in a gun fight, an' his dad makes him quit wearing guns. Next he loses that hell an' all temper o' his and beats another man to death. So his dad says he quits usin' his fists or he gits no part of the big Cross D.

"T'day he did use his fists on Jim Masters, but I'm guessin' Jim won't be back t' spill nothin' about it. An' he's got t' git hitched. Waal, if'n he ain't hitchin' up with Loretta arter what I'm seein' down thar in the windfall right

now, I'll be gettin' arter that scalawag with a shotgun."

Ma Brooks' wrinkled old face was like a yellow cartoon. She lifted the rifle and ejected a .40-50 high-powered shell from the firing chamber. She had been holding a steady bead on that roaming grizzly down there from the minute she had seen it in the berries, even before Loretta had screamed and Masters had run away.

"Danged if'n I ever knew it'd work," she said grimly. "Plumb lied to Conover, 'bout me layin' down an' shuttin' my eyes with a grizzly pokin' 'round. I ain't got no sech guts."

But she felt good now.

Copperhead

(Continued from page 33)

Nancy Cole sat in a chair beside him, her head bowed. Case closed the door and put his back against it, regarding them. They looked back at him, both asking a silent question with their eyes.

Case shook his head. "The world still turns around," he said. "You all have a lot of living to do. Don't look so sad about it."

Burke smiled wryly. "The world's stopped for me, Case. I can't convince Nancy it was all right, her shooting me. She takes it too hard. I've been trying to tell her she kept me from killing the best friend a man ever had."

"He's right," said Case. "Don't feel so bad about it, Nancy."

Nancy put her head in her hands and the tears came again. "I'll never forgive myself. If I can only do something to make up for it. Poor Burke."

Burke reached out and stroked her hair, a strange, warm light in his eyes. Case stirred, embarrassed. "Burke," he said. "Can you move around? Can you take care of yourself?"

"Sure," said Burke. He rose, walked slowly toward Case and back to the couch again. "Nothing to it. I'm practically well."

"You're not," said Nancy, staring angrily at Case. "Burke's bad hurt. Don't try to make him do anything that will hurt him more."

Case shook his head. "I want him to take the night train to San Francisco. I want you to go with him, to look after him."

Nancy's eyes widened. "Alone?"

"I hope not," said Case, and looked at Barbara Hall.

"You want me to go, too?" she asked.

Case nodded. "There is nothing for you here. It's best you go away. After a reasonable time, you can get in touch with Judge Hawkins. He will advise you what to do."

"What about you?" asked Burke.

"I can take care of myself," said Case. "I have my own plans and they concern nobody but me." He took the three sealed envelopes from his pocket, put them on the table. He emptied his wallet and placed the money beside the envelopes. "The money is for fare and expenses," he said. "You are not to open the envelopes until you get to San Francisco." He let a hard smile play over his face. "Burke, if it ever got out, in San Francisco, that the Amalgamated Central had run out of ore and then bought ten more barren claims, the bottom would fall out of their stock. If a man were to sell Amalgamated Central short, he could make a million."

"No doubt," said Burke, bitterly. "Only it takes money to make money."

"That's right," agreed Case. "Maybe in San Francisco you'll find a way. Better get ready now. Nancy, you must know someone you can trust. Have him bring a rig up here so Burke can ride to the station. Try not to be seen and don't tell a soul where you're going. You understand that? Not even Ben Hoffman."

"I won't," Nancy said. "Especially Ben Hoffman. I hate that man."

That surprise made Case feel better. "All right," he said. "I'll go now. Goodbye."

He turned quickly, slammed the door behind him and hurried down the hill. Once he thought he heard Barbara call, "Case! Wait!" But he put it down to his imagination.

That was what he would have liked her to have said.

FROM a dark spot across the street, Case watched the Copperhead Bar. It was almost train time when Ben Hoffman came rapidly down the street and turned into the place. Case lifted the gun from under his coat, tested it and put it back in place. He crossed the street then and followed Hoffman into the bar.

The place was half deserted at this

supper hour. Only a few men leaned against the bar. In the middle of the room, five men sweated out a poker game that had the earmarks of being in its second day. A few men stood behind the players, watching the game. One of these was a tall, grizzled man, a star on his coat.

Ben Hoffman sat at a table in the far corner of the room. Case stood there until Hoffman looked up and saw him and beckoned him on. Case walked over and sat down, accepting the bottle and glass Hoffman pushed toward him.

Case downed the drink and smiled at Hoffman. The man was still puzzled and wary, his eyes were unsteady and the muscles in his cheeks pulsed. Case held his tongue, forcing Hoffman to speak first.

"I can't figure you," Hoffman said. "I can't get you straight in my mind."

"No need to think too much," said Case, leaning forward. "Once I was established as Case Yewing, it was easy. The deeds for those ten claims are already on their way to Smeltertown. You can check on that at an express office. That ought to wind up your ball of yarn."

"By gosh, you *are* Lightfood," said Hoffman. "You work fast, too. That was a good trick, that woman posing as Ed's niece."

"Women," said Case, "are nice to have around. You ought to feel good about the way things turned out. Now you can devote your full time to that woman of yours."

"Yes," said Ben, color running into his face. "And have the money to do it with, too. That's what a woman falls for. Money. But I don't know about feeling good about this. You butting in and working so fast has cut me out of a lot of plunder."

"You ought to have plenty," said Case. "Brother Marks paid you plenty to get Ed Hall and Jackson Cole. What I can't figure out is why you killed Cole before you did Ed Hall. It seemed to me it should have been the other way around."

Anger touched Hoffman. "I knew what I was doing. I was sure I could get those deeds from Ed. All I would have had to do then was get these hardheads and make my own deal with Marks. You moving so quick spoiled that. You really ought to cut me in on your take, Lightfoot. After all, I really got those deeds Yewing signed." He touched his coat.

"You're a fool," said Case, "carrying evidence like that around with you."

Hoffman poured a glass full of liquor and gulped it down. "Don't worry. I'll get rid of them, fast. I guess I did all right at that. My pockets are full and there's more to be had where this came from. A man's got to look out for himself. Now I can take Nancy to the big towns. I'll make her forget her old man."

Hoffman leaned back, smiling. The faint sound of a train whistle drifted in. At the poker table, a man pulled out his watch and looked at it. "The westbound," he said. "Right on time."

IN a moment, two short blasts sounded. That meant the train was moving, its passengers aboard. Case looked at Ben Hoffman. The man was the lowest kind of a common killer; a man who killed in the dark, for money. He deserved no chance, but there was no way to prove the man's crime. He had not denied them only because he thought the man he talked with was tarred with the same brush. That gave Case an added surge of anger. He leaned forward.

"Hoffman," he said. "I wouldn't think too much about that woman if I were you."

"Why not?"

"I like her too much myself to see her taken with you. And no amount of money is going to make her like you when she knows you killed her father and Ed."

Hoffman's clenched teeth showed. "You wouldn't tell her that, Lightfoot. She wouldn't believe you if you did."

"You keep making the same mistake," said Case. "I'm not Lightfoot. I'm Case Yewing. Nancy is sure of that. She'll believe me, all right, when I tell her about you, you backshooting son. I'm going to tell all of Copperhead about you."

Ben Hoffman sat frozen, his face white.

Watching him carefully, Case rose, pounded the top of the table to draw attention to their corner. Loudly, he said, "Not a chance, Hoffman! I'll have no part of your dirty game!" Then, deliberately, he turned his back and started out.

Each step Case took seemed agony to him. The poker players and the watchers turned to stare at him. The marshal's glance flicked from Case to Hoffman. Case, watching the marshal's eyes, cursed under his breath. Was Hoffman smart enough to let him walk out, knowing full well he could prove nothing? Case was nearly abreast the lawman, ready to step past his last chance of warning when he saw the marshal's eyes go wide.

Case gathered himself in one breath, leaped aside and whirled, lifting his gun from under his coat. Back in the corner, Ben Hoffman fired. Death whispered at Case and went on to smash savagely at bottles and glasses on or behind the bar.

Hoffman had stood up. He swung his weapon for a second shot. Case fired, once.

Ben Hoffman sat slowly down in his chair. From that position he stared at Case, bewildered, then looked down at the gun in his hand. Finally he bent over, his arms stretched out and his head fell forward like a man who had tilted a bottle one too many times.

"He tried to kill me," said Case, to the man with the badge. "He tried to shoot me in the back, without any warning."

"Tried to!" yelled the marshal. "He damned near did it. Whatever made you turn around, I'll never know!" He walked over to the table, lifted Hoffman's head and laid it down again. "Dead. Deader than a nit. What was the argument about?"

"You look in his pockets," said Case, "and you'll find the deeds he stole from Burt Fogg last night. What do I do now? You going to jail me?"

"Hell, no, I ain't," swore the lawman. "Not on a deal like that. That was would-be murder. I'll trust you to stay in town, though. There'll be an inquest."

Case put his gun away. "I'll stay," he said. He walked out, cut around the building to the alley and headed for the house on the hill. He was sick inside, so physically sick it was an effort to move. He was glad he had not eaten this day.

THE house on the hill was dark. Wearily, Case let himself in, struck a match and found the lamp on the table. He lit it and turned it low, sank down in a chair, buried his face in his hands. Never had he felt so alone, so wanting of a hand to touch. It was worse than that long ago day when he had been given a job prodding a mule, deep underground. All alone, plodding along the groaning caverns beneath the earth, he had whimpered with loneliness and fear.

A faint sound brought him up. Barbara Hall stood there, not two feet from him. "You!" he said. "You didn't go."

"No, Case. I couldn't go and let you stay alone. I know that feeling. Alive or dead, I knew you would need somebody by your side this night."

She moved closer, her hands came out and she pulled his head against her, standing quiet.

Case could not break the spell. He felt the warmth of her and heard the deep steady pound of her heart. It made his senses wander for the moment but, when they came back, he could think straighter. His heavy breathing grew normal. He pulled away, stood up and gripped her shoulders.

"You can make a man have great dreams," he said, gently. "I hope you don't get hurt too much. You should have stayed on that train."

"I won't go until you come with me, Case. Sign those deeds and get away from this place."

Case shook his head. "There is more to it than that. The trouble is not over. I'd sooner wait for it here than have it catch up with me after time spent with you would make me forget it more. Right now I have nothing to offer you but trouble."

"No?" Barbara reached up to pull a torn envelope from the folds of her dress at her throat. "I opened this, Case. I don't know where the money came from, but wherever it came from, you're re-

sponsible. I'll never cash this draft until you're alive to share it."

Case looked at her. Slowly, she rose on tiptoe. His head bent down. Her lips were all that he had known they would be. Shaken, he backed away. "Sleep," he said. "Sleep and think. I'll go down town for tonight. In the morning, we'll see."

"Don't go, Case," she said. "Stay. It's safer here."

"No," he said. "Not for me." He let himself out into the night.

CHAPTER VIII

Rich Wrath

COPPERHEAD had come to life. The walks were crowded. Cowboys, in from some distant range, moved along the walk. Two uniformed cavalrymen, their trappings covered with dust, reined up before a saloon, slung their dispatch cases over their shoulders and marched inside to quench a long thirst.

Case saw all this and appreciated it. This was life and the feel of life was strong with him, with the taste of Barbara's lips still on his. He started across the street after the soldiers. He was halfway to the other side when something heavy and small hit him in the back, knocking him down.

The sound of a shot came to Case, as if he was far away from its source. He pulled himself back from that remote place, rolled and pulled out his gun. Frank Lightfoot's little partner came plunging toward him, swinging his gun for another shot. Case fired and the little man fell backward, as if he had run into some invisible barrier.

Case worked a knee up under him and straightened. Men were running, scurrying for cover. Across the street, in the dark shadows, a bull voice kept shouting, 'Get him, Frank! Get him!"

Case turned toward that sound. Near the spot that voice had come from, a gun flashed its funnel of flame. Case swayed and put his left hand down into the dust to steady himself. When that gun flashed again, he shot at the shadow behind it. Frank Lightfoot staggered into a shaft of yellow lampglow. Case fired at him again. Lightfoot said, "Damn you, Dude!" and fell down.

Case got his feet under him and managed to rise. He went staggering toward the sound of that commanding voice. It was Sam Chedernick. Sam was firing. Case waited until Chedernick's squat figure grew solid in his vision. Then he held his gun up with both hands and emptied it. Sam doubled over a hitchbar and hung there.

Case turned away. He looked up the east slope, behind the street, and saw a light burning in Ed Hall's shack. He started toward it. The light moved away from him. It grew dim, then vanished.

After that it was all a deep blank void, a deep, groaning cavern beneath the ground that had closed around him, trapping him. A place without beginning or end, whirling through space.

THE beard bothered Case at first. He had never had a beard before. He kept pulling at it. Strange faces floated around him. From far away a man's voice came.

"By George, gentlemen. His pulse is normal. Weak, but normal. It's unbelievable."

The outlines of a room came in to surround Case. A white room full of light and air and sun. Four men stood around his bed, one the homely little man Case had heard them call Doc, at Ed's funeral. The other three were professional-looking men, bearded and severe.

Case felt his tongue move in his parched mouth. He heard a voice say, "Where am I?" and recognized it as a cracked caricature of his own.

The Copperhead doctor said, "Back from the dead, I'd say. Here, swallow this."

Case drank, awkwardly, spilling some of the aromatic liquid. What he managed to get down made him feel better.

"Where am I?" he repeated.

"In my hospital," the doctor said. "These other gentlemen have been assisting me, Doctor Barnes, of Saint Louis.

Doctors Clayton of Omaha and Jules of San Francisco."

"How am I?" asked Case, and his hand went up to touch his beard again. It was nearly an inch long. "How long have I been here?"

The bespectacled Doctor Jules said, "This is the tenth day, Yewing. How you are, why you are alive, is a riddle to us. How do you feel?"

"Sleepy," said Case.

"That's a good sign. Let yourself go."

Case stared around the room, feeling an unaccountable disappointment. Then he drifted off.

When he woke again, he felt strong-er. And hollow inside. It was morning. The eleventh day. Sounds, outside his door, made him turn his head expectantly. A strange, buxom woman came in, carrying a tray. Again disappointment tugged at Case.

"It's good to see you awake, Mr. Yewing," the woman said. "The Saints be praised." She set the tray down beside the bed and tears came to her eyes. She dabbed at them with a corner of her white apron and smiled. "Now we'll start filling up the hollow in you." She propped Case up and fed him savory broth, a slow spoonful at a time.

After awhile the four doctors came again. They felt his pulse, took his temperature and probed his wounds, setting fire to dull pain. When they were through, Doctor Clayton spoke to the Copperhead medico. "We can't do anymore. We'll leave him in good hands and get home to our own practice."

The others agreed. Jules, from San Francisco, laughed. "Now I can go back without fear of getting called out by your business associate, Yewing? He's rather a forceful man."

"Business associate?" said Case.

"McCloud. He cuts a swath, that man. He looked more like a miner than the business genius he is. The town will remember him for a long time."

"I think we've talked enough," said Clayton, firmly. "Yewing has a long pull, yet. He shouldn't be bothered with business details."

They bade him goodbye and left him alone to drowse and wonder. The nurse came in often. Each time, Case tried to ask her questions, but she shook her head.

"No talk to excite you," she said. "That is orders. I'll not disobey them."

It was nearly dark when the little doctor came in again. He looked down at Case, speculatively. "What's the matter, Yewing? What's wrong with you?"

Case felt startled; it was as if the man had pried into his soul. There was something the matter with him. Something missing. Some spark that he needed and that eluded him. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know what's wrong."

The medico frowned. "Maybe I do. Those three specialists ordered me not to let you have visitors for another week. I'm going against those orders, but only for a few minutes, mind you. Miss Hall is not well. She never left the side of this bed for eight days and nights. I think you owe your life to her, rather than us medical men, Yewing. Every time you died, she pulled you back."

He turned away to open the door and Case knew then what bothered him. He half arose, calling, "Barbara!"

She stood in the doorway a moment, pale and wan, her cheeks hollow, dark circles under her eyes. Then, with a little cry, she flew across the room and dropped to her knees beside the bed. "Case," she said. Then she buried her head on his shoulders and her tears came.

Case reached up and touched her hair, startled, for the first time, at the skeletonlike hand he saw. But that contact brought back the spirit and the fire he had groped for and couldn't find, alone.

"Barbara," he said, over and over. "Barbara."

She raised her head and her bright smile broke through her tears. "Everything's all right," she said. "Everything's all right now. I was so afraid."

The doctor broke in. "If you have any influence over this young woman, Yewing, I wish you would order her to bed for a few days. If she won't do that, I won't be responsible. She's had no sleep since your . . . er . . . shooting affair."

Case looked at her. "Don't let her back into this room, Doc, until she's stayed in bed two days. You understand that, Barbara?"

"Will you be all right? Is Mrs. Higgins taking good care of you?"

Case heard himself laugh. "I'll be walking in two days."

THOSE were two long days for Case. When the forty-eight hours had passed, he was sitting up as the doctor came in, chuckling and boasting. "I reckon those big-city medicos don't know it all, eh Yewing? All good medicine don't come in bottles."

"I'll swear it." Case smiled. "I don't think another large dose would hurt, either."

"I've got it already mixed up," said the doctor. He turned to the door, threw it wide. "All right, boys. But remember what I said."

Judge Hawkins led in a procession of beaming old men, all trying to be quiet and silent and failing miserably when they saw him sitting up.

"By yiminy!" shouted Swede Hanson. "Hy're you, Case?"

"Look at the tough bucko," said another. "I'll bet you he ain't hurt none at all. He's just lazy."

"Please!" The little doctor pushed them back and Judge Hawkins helped.

"Take it easy, boys," the judge warned. "There will come a day when you can pump his arm off. But mind what Doc Smith says."

They subsided, grinning and abashed. The judge came to the side of the bed. "I'm elected to do the talking, Case," he said. "And Doc says I have to make it short. We just want to say thanks. We know the whole story. We know about Ben Hoffman. Lightfoot and his partner and Sam Chedernick are dead and buried. Lightfoot lived a little while. He was a vindictive man. Before he died, he put skids under Marks and DeVain. They're both in jail, with five counts of murder against them. On top of that, the Amalgamated stockholders have them dead to rights for fraud. They'll never get away."

"The claims," said Case. "Was I right about them?"

"Dead right. I did exactly what you said. Every man in this room owes his fortune to you. The two girls and McCloud are taken care of. Anything you want, just ask for it."

"I want nothing," said Case. "I was just paying Ed Hall back for what he had done for me."

Impatience broke through the old men again. "How about it, Yewing?" one asked. "Will you smelt our ore, if we start digging?"

"Me?" said Case, startled. "How?"

They all started talking at once and Case could make no sense of it. Then Barbara Hall came slipping through their ranks, waving a sheaf of yellow pages.

"Wait!" she cried. "Wait. You're getting the cart before the horse. Case doesn't even know what a big man he is, yet. Now, please go outside and wait. I'll let you know Mr. Yewing's decision."

They filed out, the doctor with them, and closed the door. Barbara sat down beside the bed, leaned over and kissed Case and straightened, flushing. She looked well and rested again. Her eyes sparkled. "A fine secretary I make," she said. "Kissing the boss."

"Boss?" Case demanded. "What's this all about?"

"You listen," she said. "These telegrams are from Burke McCloud. The first one says:

Sold ten thousand shares of Amalgamated short with that lousy money you tried to palm off on Nancy and me. When I let the cat out of the bag, Amalgamated hit the skids.

—Burke.

BARBARA put the sheet down and picked up the next one. Case stared, unbelievingly, as she read on. From those telegrams, some comical and terse, Case saw a bent little man emerge as a figure of steel and cold nerve. An unheralded little giant knocking the props from un-

der a sprawling copper empire, stick by stick. Bending it, breaking it, sending it tumbling down into chaos, then building with solid blocks what once had been a house of cards. Barbara read from the next to last sheet.

You now own seventy-two percent of Amalgamated. Assets, including undeveloped property the three top dogs were trying to steal from the stockholders, total six million. You got enough? Advise. Advise also if I have a job with Amalgamated. I'm broke.

—Burke.

"That one," said Barbara, "came yesterday and hasn't been answered. Do you realize what it all means, Case? You're a king. Wealthy."

Case shook his head. "It's too big. Too great. Controlling a thing like Amalgamated. I couldn't go it alone."

"Could I help, Case? Could I do anything?"

"Everything. But there will be little peace, Barbara. There will be trouble. No end of it."

"Case," she said, gently. "I don't drink, nor like strong tobacco. But I like life as well as you do. If trouble is part of that life, let it be. But when trouble comes, don't pick it up and run away. Let me help you carry it. I want that right."

Case rubbed his eyes and looked at the one telegram remaining in Barbara's hand. "What does that one say?"

"It's Burke's last," she said. He read:

Have not heard from you regarding job. If I am hired, I want a raise. Nancy threatening to shoot me again if I don't marry her. Advise.

—Burke.

Case rubbed his eyes again. "Miss Hall," he said. "You can advise the Copperhead owners they can start shipping ore, immediately. Now take a telegram."

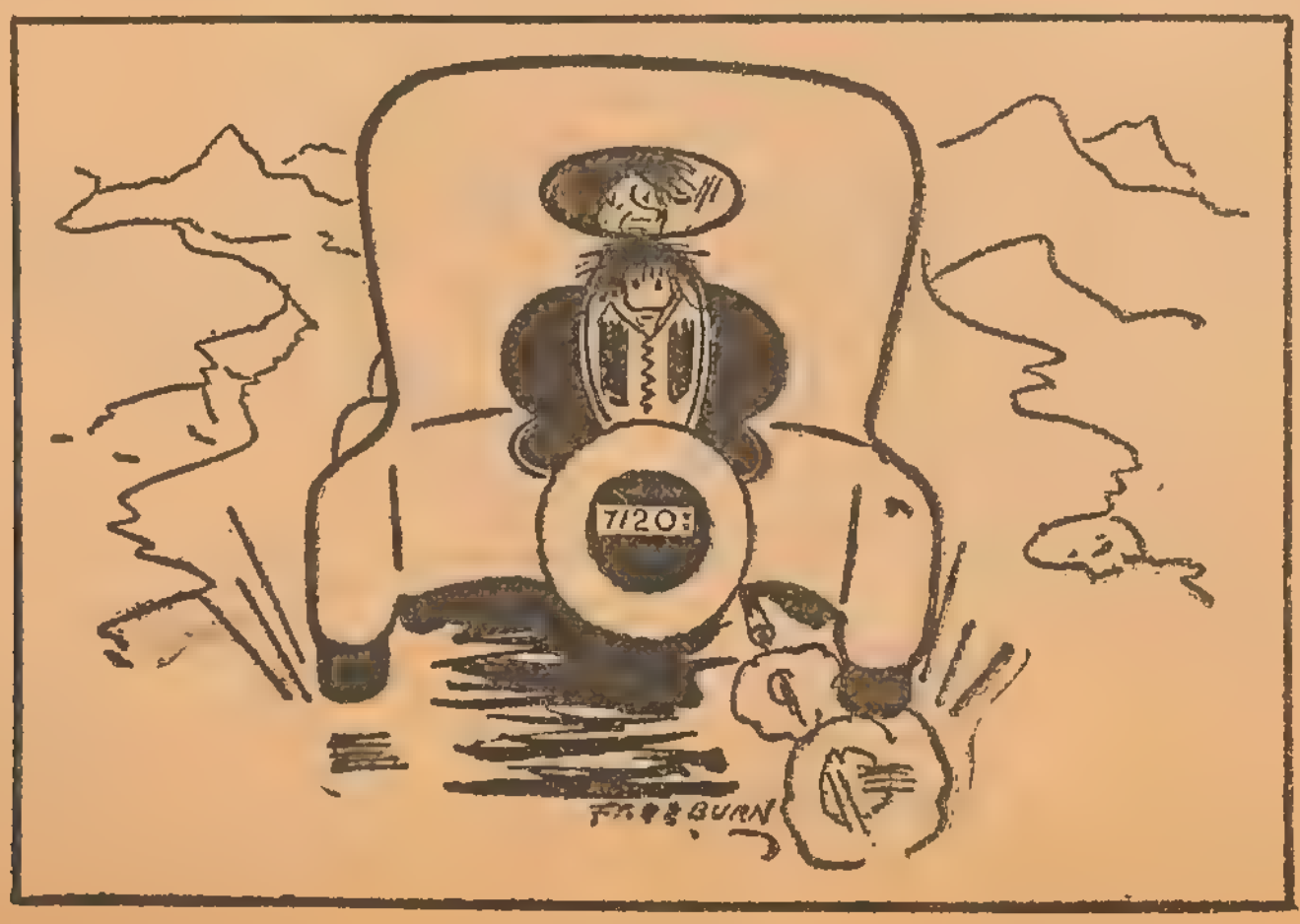
"Yes, sir," said Barbara.

He said:

Burke McCloud, Chairman, Board of Directors, Amalgamated Central. Advise Nancy carry out threat if you marry her before Barbara and I arrive. We must set example of efficiency for rest of organization. The four of us can be married as quickly as you two. Regards.

Barbara finished writing and put her pencil aside. She was smiling and her eyes brimmed with tears. Case reached out for her. Later, when the doctor looked in, Barbara turned her head and said, "Tell them it's all right."

Doc Smith closed the door, hooked his thumbs in his vest and turned to the grinning Copperhead men. "The answer is yes," he told them. "Amalgamated will handle your ore. But you can't see Yewing any more today. He's a busy man."



Trouble at Blue Lode

(Continued from page 41)

and splatted against his chin. His head reeled back, and he staggered. But he kept his footing, and struck back as Warden aimed another punch. His blow caught Warden on the jaw and rocked him back two steps. The man's handsome face grimaced with pain, but—Jeff thought—the dude's got guts. But now a cry rang out, "Fight! A tough crew is tearing the Golden Horn apart!"

A man had shouted from down-street, and Jeff could see a vast crowd milling about before the big honkatonk. He saw more. A sudden spurt of flames shot from the Golden Horn's doorway. Now voices shouted, "Fire!" Men were running toward the honkatonk from every direction.

Jeff said, "We'll finish our business later."

He started running, and Warden fell in beside him. Gasping, the man said, "Belle— Do you suppose she got out? That place is burning like tinder!"

They kept together, and once they reached the swelling and excited crowd they fought their way through. The same wild thought was in both their minds: *Did Belle get out?* Excited talk billowed around them, and the snatches he caught told Jeff what had happened. A big bunch of hardcases—men thought to be in Hugo Lomax's hire—had entered the Golden Horn and almost at once started a brawl. In less than five minutes, the brawl had become a free-for-all. A riot! Shots were fired. One of the intruders knocked down a ceiling oil lamp, which crashed on the floor and splattered its kerosene. The oil had caught fire, and the flames had spread so fast they couldn't be controlled. Now the inside of the honkatonk was a holocaust.

A BUCKET brigade was being formed, but it would be a feeble attempt to stop such a conflagration. Smoke was billowing and puffing from doors and windows, and the roaring flames shot up along the face of the building. Gaining the front of the watching throng, Jeff found Duke Rigby gathering together a group of men to drive Hugo Lomax and his toughs out of town. Duke had been beaten around the head and his face was bloody. He was yelling, "Let it burn! I'll build a bigger and better place. Just keep the fire from spreading to other buildings. Come on, I'm going after that fat son—"

"Duke, you sure everybody's out?"

"Sure; we dragged out the men who were hurt."

"What about Belle? She went up to her room before this broke out."

Rigby looked startled. "I didn't see her," he said. "Hell, man; you don't suppose—?"

Jeff waited to hear no more. He was running forward. Somebody yelled, "Come back, you fools!" He became aware then that John Warden was right behind him. He sprang up the steps, leaped across the porch, burst through the swing doors. A roaring blast met him. The red-yellow glare of the flames half blinded him, and the great heat hit him like a giant fist. It was like plunging through an inferno —a wilder hell than a man could imagine. Jeff stripped off his coat and wrapped it about his face, and then, blinded but with face shielded, he drove across the long room. The stairway to the second floor was at the very end of the barroom.

Colliding with tables, stumbling over chairs, Jeff smashed through, and behind came John Warden. Once Jeff fell, falling over a chair, and Warden's hands dragged him up. Warden was choking, coughing, and Jeff, on his feet again, pulled the coat from his face and looked at the man. He saw a soot-blackened face, singed eyebrows and hair, a pair of burned hands. Warden seemed to be strangling.

"Your coat, man!" Jeff shouted.

Again he covered his face and plunged on. He crashed against the staircase, was momentarily stunned. Warden was already climbing the flame-flooded steps, and tendrils of fire ate at the man's clothes. The roaring lifted to a wild crescendo of sound, and there was a violent cracking as of Chinese firecrackers set off all at once. Staggering now, Jeff climbed the stairs and his weight, along with Warden's made them sway and groan. He overtook Warden, who had fallen to his knees and was strangling again. Jeff hit him on the back. "Get up —get up!"

He got by Warden, and suddenly the flames were less dense. He found himself in the upper hallway, blinded by billowing clouds of smoke. Every breath drew smoke and heat into his lungs, and like the other man he began to choke. He lurched from wall to wall of the hall, shouting now. . . . Shouting Belle's name.

A dozen doorways, some open and some closed, bewildered him. He shouted, "Belle—Belle, where are you?" He stared into rooms, saw only smoke and a lace of flames eating up through the floor cracks. He flung open doors, shouted again. He was a wild man, raving crazily. He lived an eternity of torment all in the space of minutes, and then at the last doorway he found Belle Shayne. He stumbled over her.

She lay across the threshold, unconscious, where she had fallen when overcome by smoke. She had not been warned, and she had become aware of the fire too late. Opening her door to flee, panic must have seized her. . . . So much flashed through Jeff Macklin's mind as he bent and lifted her.

He drew his coat over her golden head, loosely covered her blanched face, even as he held her in his arms and was moving through the thick smoke. He staggered more wildly than before, his strength far gone, and he had the alarmed thought, *"I'll not make it!* He came to the end of the hall, where John Warden lay sprawled. The stairs leading down were a mass of leaping flames, now, with a great noise, they collapsed. Panic gripped Jeff Macklin, and he turned and ran. Ran with wild speed into one of the rooms boiling with red-laced smoke. Across it was a window. Jeff raised his leg, his boot smashed out the panes. He kicked again, and the frame burst out. He shouted into the alleyway below, and part of the watching crowd was there.

"A rope, somebody!"

There were yells. Jeff put down his limp burden, leaned from the window and shouted and cursed. A horsebacker came up through the red-brightness, swinging a lass-rope. The loop snaked up, and Jeff's burned and blistered hands caught it. It took him but a minute to tie the rope about Belle Shayne and lower her to the reaching hands below. It took him longer, far longer, to fight his way back along the hall to where John Warden lay. He was not consicous of dragging the overcome man into that same room and lowering him down. And Jeff had to be told, later on, that he had climbed through the window to hang from the sill and then drop to safety. It was dim in his mind.

THE three of them were taken to Doc Marvin's office. Willing hands carried Belle Shayne and John Warden, but Jeff Macklin walked. He reeled and lurched, staggered like a drunk, but still he walked. The medico was kept busy with the two patients overcome by smoke, so his wife did what she could for Jeff Macklin. She knew how to treat burns, and she applied a soothing ointment to Jeff's burned and blistered face and hands.

He waited only long enough for the doctor to come from the room where he had worked over Belle and John Warden. He said, "How are they, doc?"

"They'll be all right in a day or two," the medico said. "Miss Shayne has no burns at all, but Warden—well, it'll take weeks for his burns to heal. Let me take a look at you."

Jeff submitted to an examination, was treated all over again. When it was over, he said, "Doc, if it hadn't been for that

John Warden, neither the girl or I would be here now."

"He got you out?"

"I was a goner, but he dragged me to a window."

"Lucky for you," Doc Marvin said, eyeing him curiously.

Jeff walked from the house, and he found a portion of the crowd gathered in the street. Excited voices questioned him, and he told the gathering that the two patients were certain to be all right.

"Thanks to that Eastern hombre, John Warden," he added.

"How's that?" a man asked, and the whole crowd pushed forward.

Jeff Macklin said, "Warden got us both out. If it hadn't been for him, both Belle and I would have died back there. The smoke got me on the stairs, but Warden came back for me after finding Belle."

He walked on, still unsteady on his feet, and headed for the Union House. He needed a room and a bed, and sleep. Behind him, the fire was burning itself out. In another part of town, angry voices and several shots lifted. It might have been, Jeff Macklin thought wearily, Duke Rigby having it out with fat Hugo Lomax who was to blame for it all.

JEFF had planned to be up and away by sun-up, but for once he overslept. The sun was high when he woke, and it was mid-morning by the time he was ready for the trail. Once again he was rigged in duds he fitted—rough range clothes. He had his heavy poke in his dun's saddle bags, and his pack mare was loaded with enough supplies to see him over the long trail to his ranch near the Magdalenas. Because of his bandaged hands, he had asked the liveryman to saddle the two animals. He took it easy, mounting, nursing his hurt hands. He headed out of Blue Lode at a walk, trying to rid himself of the memories that rode with him. It would take time to forget, a lot of time. But Belle Shayne had what she wanted. Jeff told himself she should be happy.

He had traveled less than a mile when the rig overtook him. It was a fine carriage with two handsome bays in harness and a uniformed colored man driving. And its passenger—Jeff couldn't believe his eyes.

He reined in as the carriage halted. "Belle, you shouldn't be here. Not after what you went through." He shook his head as he spoke.

Belle laughed. "I'm all right, Jeff," she told him. "Fresh air and sunlight are good medicine." She sobered then, and added, "Jeff, I had to follow you when I heard you'd left town. Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" Jeff asked.

"Tell the whole town that John Warden saved me—and you—from the fire," Belle said. "When John heard, he was awfully upset."

Jeff didn't say anything.

"I know," Belle went on. "You knew

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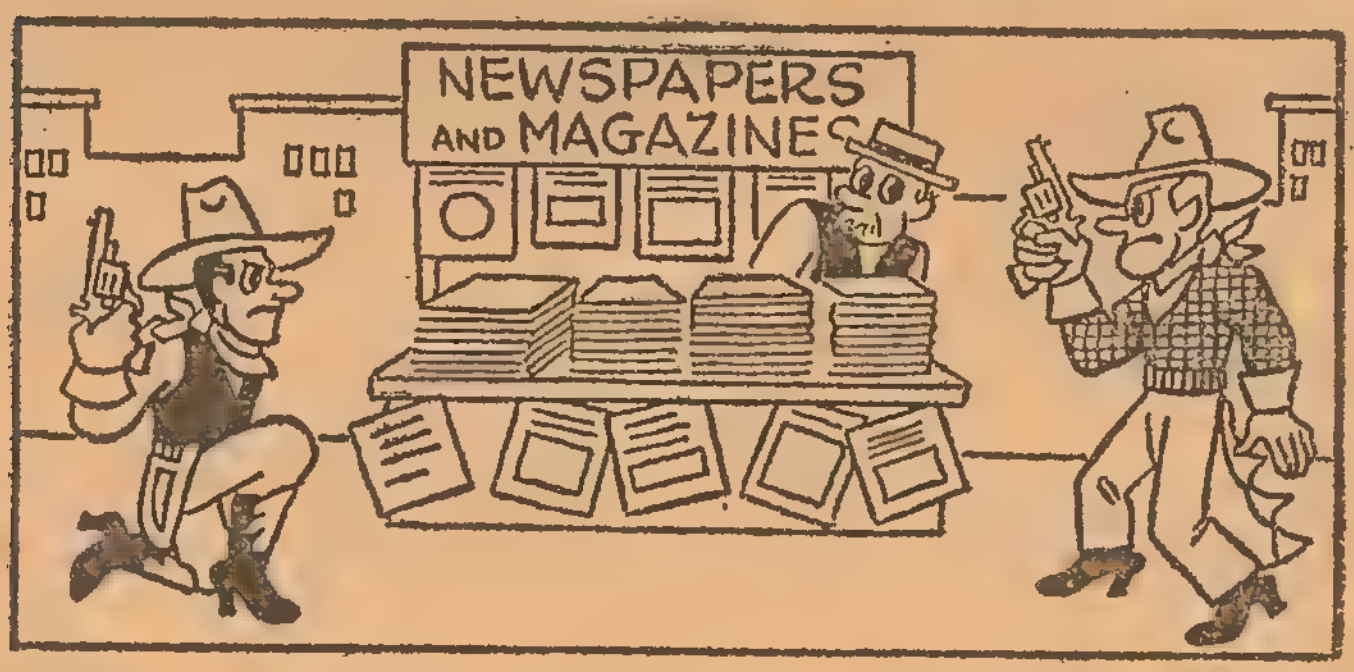
PEPSI-COLA PEPSI-COLA

I was fond of John, but not in love with him. You thought that if I believed he saved my life, I'd fall in love with him. You knew I hadn't a chance of being happy with him if I hadn't love to back up my marriage to him. . . . I guess you know me too well, Jeff. You knew that a home in some Eastern city and a whirl at society wouldn't be enough to a woman like me. Do you know too, cowpoke, that it's really you I'm in love with?"

"I guess I hoped that, Belle," Jeff said. "But after all I'm only a cowpoke."

Belle laughed again, happily, and told him, "I'm going with you, Jeff. And I'll make a rancher's wife, you'll see." She paused, smiling at him. Then: "John Warden asked me to give you a message. I don't know what it means, but he said that if you ever wonder about what makes a gentleman—you should take a look in a mirror!"



Frontier Sam

(Continued from page 47)

sand island in the river," decided Forsyth. "Not that it's much shelter, with only a threat of water to cross, but it's the best we can do."

A few skirmishers kept up a steady fire to cover the retreat to the island. It was a mere sandpit, about two hundred feet long and forty wide. A few scrub willows permitted the horses to be tied.

"Lie flat, men," extorted the colonel, "and dig yourself in as far as you can."

"What with?" grunted the Virginian.

"Knives and fingers," snapped the sergeant. "An' yuh ain't got all day, neither."

About nine in the morning the grand assault commenced. Hundreds of dismounted Indians, armed with Sharps, deadliest of rifles, crawled through the long prairie grass to get within easy range of the island. Farther out on the plain, well out of gunshot, lined up the main body of mounted warriors—the "dog soldiers"—painted hideously and stripped to the skin. On the distant ridge the women and children of the tribes danced and yelled threats that carried on the wind.

"Jumping lizards!" husked a weathered plainsman, his face blanching. "Man an' boy I been aroamin' these yere prairies, but I ain't never seen so many painted varmints in one place afore. We's plumb sunk!"

Sam lay next to him. He raised his head, peered across the inch-deep stream. "At Thermopylae," he remarked, "three hundred Spartans stood off three hundred thousand Persians. The odds are not so great against us."

The plainsman stared. "Holy cats! Never heard o' them galoots. Must of been afore my time."

A thin smile etched Sam's face. "Just a little, Jim."

But Charlie Smith didn't open his mouth. Usually he never permitted Frontier Sam to say a word, no matter how trifling, without promptly making him the butt of his heavy jeers. Just now, however, he was busy, frantically busy. Bowie knife was not enough for him, or fingernails. With the barrel of his carbine he dug and dug. The sweat beaded his brow, his giant figure seemed to burrow like a mole into the ground.

"Hey, there, Smith!" shouted the sergeant. "Yo'r gittin' sand in th' barrel o' your gun."

Out of the depths came a curiously muffled voice. "You lemme alone. I knows what I'm doin'."

"Yeah," muttered the plainsman loud enough to be heard. "He's agoin' clear down tuh China." He glanced curiously at Sam. "You ain't afeared?"

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"Why?" asked Sam quietly. "Isn't God with us here as well as elsewhere?"

"Mebbe so. All I knows is He better be showing up mighty quick. Lookit! Here they come!"

A TERRIFIC fire came from the Indians hidden in the grass. A covering fire. For, as it swept across the little island and clipped the willows with a hail of bullets, the mounted "dog soldiers" set in motion. On they came at full speed across the plain, a solid, thundering mass, sloped down over their horses' manes, firing their rifles, reloading and firing again without slackening, charging straight for the devoted little band. In front, on a magnificent stallion, galloped Chief Roman Nose, resplendent in a crimson sash.

"Hold your fire, men," ordered Forsyth above the tumult. "We can't afford to waste a single bullet."

On and on they came, until the endless prairie seemed in solid motion. On and on, whooping and yelling, until they hit the bank of the Arickaree. On and on, through the inch-deep water as though no barrier existed.

A single shot rang out. Flaming with anger, the colonel flung around. "Who disobeyed orders?" he spoke in an awful voice. Deep down in the sand, so deep that no part of him was visible, lay Charlie Smith. His carbine was wavering in the air, its barrel pointed toward the sky. A thin wisp of smoke curled upward.

Halfway across, the water deepened a trifle. The horses splashed to their fetlocks, became unsteady.

"Let 'em have it, men," shouted Forsyth. Forty-nine carbines glinted, forty-nine carbines spoke as one. A hail of death swept across the shallow stream. Down went horses and whooping riders, turned the muddy water to a sodden red. With a great cheer the men reloaded, sent a second murdering scythe across the plunging ranks. And a third. Aiming, firing and reloading as fast as he could, Jim turned toward Sam.

"How ye doin', lad?"

"Not bad!" Frontier Sam's voice was as steady and calm as though he were discussing the weather. His thin fingers trembled not a hairsbreadth; he took quiet, sure aim, fired. Before Jim's wondering eyes a big, hideously striped buck in the forefront of the charge threw up his hands and fell crashing into the water.

"Jumping lizard!" husked Jim. "*Not bad!*" he says "Why, that's as purty a shot as ever I seen!"

AS THE lead brave fell, his comrades wavered. Another volley cured their hesitation. Horses turned and fled pellmell back to the farther bank, in spite of Roman Nose's angry screeching.

"Good work!" said the colonel approvingly. "But they'll be back again. They're only starting." He came over to Sam Schlesinger, put his hand on a narrow shoulder. "You've done nobly, Sam. I'm mighty glad I wasn't able to send you back when I wanted to."

"Th-thank you, sir." Sam was stammering, and his thin face flushed embarrassedly.

Then Forsyth strode over to the deepest pit. He looked down into the hole, and his lips curled. "I thought you were a *man,* Smith," he grated. "You funked all through the fight."

Slowly Smith's head came up. His former high color was gone. His lips chattered and his eyes glared. "You . . . you got me wrong, colonel!" he said thickly. "I . . . I been taking a bead on them varmints all th' time."

Forsyth spat. "That was the longest bead I ever did see," he said coldly. "The only shot you fired hit the sky."

ABOUT two o'clock the shattered Indians had re-formed. Again they swept on confidently, irresistible as a thunderbolt. This time they surged upon the sandy island, slashed in upon the prone men. With carbines that became too hot to handle, the little company fought back. When those failed, they drew revolvers and fired as fast as the barrels could spin. Then bowie knives

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went into action, and bare fists. The island became a plunging, twisted maelstrom.

A painted warrior leaned over his horse and fired pointblank at Jim. The plainsman gave a little groan, pitched headlong. With a whispered cry Sam lifted his Colt, pulled the trigger. There was a hollow click. The chamber was empty. Flinging down the useless weapon, the little man pulled out his knife and sprang upon the triumphant brave. The blade plunged deep into his heart. The whoop of victory turned to a bubbling shriek.

Sam went down on his knees before Jim, "My friend! My friend!" he cried. "Tell me you're all right!"

Jim opened darkening eyes. A froth of blood dyed his lips. A pallid grin moved across his countenance. "All right? Sure —I'm—all right—you leetle cuss!"

A shudder came over him. He sagged. His eyes closed.

"Jim! Jim!" But the plainsman had fought his last fight; had seen the last of the prairie he loved.

For the first and last time in his life, Sam Schlesinger uttered a curse. He sprang to his feet, eyes slitted, face like a prairie fire. What happened next remains still a saga of the Ninth U. S. Cavalry.

The little man was everywhere. Carbines, revolvers, bowies seemed to grow and multiply around him. Where the fight was hottest, there in the very thick of it was Sam. He screeched like a prairie wolf; the bravest of the "dog soldiers" trembled and fell away as he dashed upon them. He was here, there, everywhere!

All the horses of the troop had been shot. Lt. Beecher was drilled through the side, and lay in mortal agony. Col. Forsyth sat against a willow, with a shattered leg before him, and a furrowed scalp. Half the men were dead, or wounded.

But Frontier Sam was an army in himself. Since the death of Jim, who had spoken decently to him, he had gone berserk. Ward, himself wounded, stared at him in helpless wonder. His hair stood on end, and his voice was the screech of an owl.

He had fought his way once through the tangled, pushing tribes, had whirled to plunge back in again, when he heard a man's cry of unutterable fear. He swung around. There, writhing upon the ground, lay Charlie Smith, the giant. A heavily painted warrior towered over the shrinking man, scalping knife lifted. Though a Colt lay close to Smith, his palsied fingers made no attempt to grasp it.

With a bound Sam was upon the Indian, knife in hand. The brave twisted and slashed at him. The blade ripped through Sam's arm, but the bowie went true to its mark. With a surprised grunt the Indian tottered, dropped like a pole-axed buffalo.

"Hope he didn't hurt you?" Sam asked the cowering giant. There was actually sympathy in his tones. But Smith just moaned and scrambled away into some neighboring bushes.

Sam wasted no time. He dashed past the wounded colonel. Forsyth breathed heavily. "We're finished, Sam," he spoke with an effort. "Unless—"

Bloody, left arm dangling, Sam managed a salute. "Not yet, sir," he declared cheerily. "I have an idea." Then he was off.

Forsyth closed his eyes. What could this strange recruit's *idea* be?

He had not long to wait. Sam disdained the shouting braves who filled his path. As though he were sure of a charmed life he raced through them, wriggled under plunging horses' bellies. There was only one bullet to his Colt. His carbine long ago had been rendered useless. But all he needed was one shot!

He found his man at the farther end of the island. A magnificent figure, girdled by a red sash, sitting his cavorting horse like a statute. Roman Nose, chief of all the tribes!

His little band of death companions saw the oncoming little figure. With whoops of rage they lifted rifles. But

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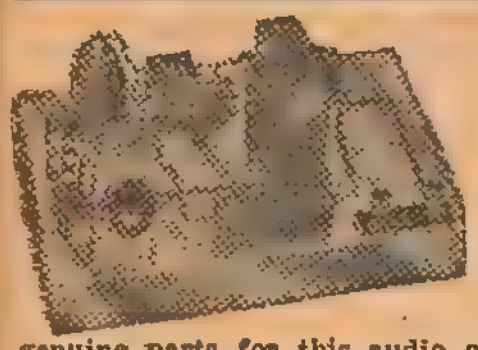

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Sam was quicker on the trigger. The Colt spat once. Roman Nose coughed, clapped clutching fingers at his heart, and slid like a lumbered tree from his saddle.

A CRY of dismay went up from the Indians at the fall of their mighty leader. This little man must be an avenging spirit, a ghost whom they hadn't properly laid. With one accord they swung their mounts around, and jostled each other in their mad rush to be away, to be anywhere but where that evil spirit was.

They didn't stop on hitting the farther bank. Their yelling dread carried them across the waving plain, up the distant ridge and into vanishment on the farther side.

The battle of Arickaree had been won —chiefly by a half-pint little man who never before had fired a gun or seen a charge of Indian warriors in full flight.

Wherever the Ninth Cavalry foregathered thereafter—wherever the lonely bivouac fire brought out tales of distant days and deeds of daring, there someone was sure to bring up the fabulous saga of Sam Schlesinger.

A tough old general, himself a famous Indian fighter, wrote a poem about Sam; and a snooty army journal published it. It isn't very good poetry, but the sentiment is okay. It goes like this:

When the foe charged on the breast-
works,
With the madness of despair,
And the bravest souls were tested,
The little Jew was there.
When the weary dozed on duty,
Or the wounded needed care,
When another shot was called for,
The little Jew was there.

With the festering dead around them,
Shedding poison in the air,
When the crippled chieftain ordered,
The little Jew was there!

"Yes, I need a man. Had any experience behind a bar?"

A Man — and a Gun

(Continued from page 55)

back in long streamers along the column. The oxen and mules will become unmanageable, and will give us time to train guns on Pawnee's renegades. We'll be able to tell them from the manner in which they go for their guns."

When the oxen plodded to the top of the slope, Quinn drifted a little to one side of the column, his rifle in readiness.

THE first muslin streamer whipped back like a flag along the column, catching a fractious mule across the face so that the animal bucked against the traces.

Other streamers cut the wind, and back along the column Quinn saw a barrel-chested bullwhacker paw for his gun on the wagon seat. Quinn fired and the bullwhacker slipped forward, his scream rasping against the ears as the heavy wheels of the freight wagon crushed over him.

Some of the bullwhackers strained cursingly to keep their stampeded animals in hand, and Quinn knew them for unsuspecting friends. Others had seized their guns and sought the protection of the wagons for battle.

The riflemen of the lead wagons had the advantage of surprise, though, and after a short battle the renegades were rounded up. They numbered a little less than half of the drivers of the train.

Quinn regarded their sullen faces and had Sergeant Blakely Campbell brought from the wagon and untied.

"You had better ride to the fort and bring relief," Quinn suggested, looking away. "There will be a need for drivers to take charge of the renegades' wagons."

Quinn was conscious of the sergeant's eyes upon him.

"Will you be here when I return?" Sergeant Campbell asked.

Quinn shook his head.

"I'll ride back to Pawnee Pondrel's way-station," he said. "Pawnee has promised me clothes. He said that I would

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earn them. He need not know that the job isn't finished."

"Clothes to escape in," Sergeant Campbell surmised. "But the Civil War is ended. We had word of it at the outpost a few days after you left."

The sergeant paused. "There is a need for officers in the army of *our* country. Major Amberly hoped that you would stay."

Quinn looked at the sergeant's sandy hair, and at the dry line of blood around his broken teeth. The sergeant's stress of the word *our* knifed at Quinn's thoughts.

"A war is never ended for the defeated," Quinn said quietly. "It is only the conqueror who can rest on his laurels."

THE next evening when Quinn returned to Pawnee Pondrel's way station, darkness had already blanketed the plains.

Inside, by the amber light of the lamp, Quinn looked at the slash-mouthed hugeness of Pawnee's pock-marked head.

"I have come for the clothes," Quinn sad wryly.

Quinn leaned his rifle against the table and then sat so that he faced Pawnee and his back was to the wall.

"You led the freighters to Chief Yellow Horse?" Pawnee questioned.

Quinn nodded, not wanting to put the lie into words. "I followed the map."

That much was true. He'd followed the map until the wagon train had been stopped.

"And did you see the Oglalas attack the train?" Pawnee asked softly.

Quinn shook his head, sensing a trap.

"I went back to scout the trail as you suggested," he said guardedly. "I was too far back."

Pawnee Pondrel caught the rifle with his toe and knocked it to the floor. With his bear-strong legs he pushed roughly against the table so that Quinn was pinned against the wall.

"You have seen enough that Pawnee Pondrel can not let you live," Pawnee said sibilantly. "There will be investigations, and there must be no tongues to ease men's conscience."

Quinn sat frozen, with the edge of the table dug against his stomach. Pawnee Pondrel swayed a little in the middle of the room. His round button fingers like clubs at his sides.

"What of the freighters in your hire?" Quinn questioned. "You can't silence all the tongues."

Pawnee laughed so that the lips curved over yellowish horse-square teeth.

"Did you, too, believe that Yellow Horse would spare their lives?" Pawnee questioned mockingly. "The simple-minded idiots believed that, anxious for the large wages that Pawnee Pondrel promised."

Quinn watched Pawnee's hands, and then looked again at his beady, rodent eyes. Yes, Pawnee Pondrel would be capable of planning the mass murder of those who trusted him.

"What would you saw if I were to tell you that the wagon train was turned aside?" Quinn questioned, his tongue dry against his throat. "What if I were to tell you that many tongues know of your treachery—that many men will come to seek revenge?"

The slash of Pawnee Pondrel's lips hardened and the pockmarked firmness of his round cheeks quivered in rage.

"That I would believe," Pawnee snarled, "but you will never live to gloat over your treachery."

Pawnee pawed down for the gun underfoot and Quinn reared back, flinging the heavy table so that it caught the club-armed renegade on the point of the shoulder.

The table landed heavily on its side, and Quinn drove over it, clawing his hands around Pawnee's bull-strong neck.

Cursing and spitting, Pawnee tumbled back, the rifle hard between them as Quinn landed on top. Then before Quinn could drive his fist into the renegade's jaw, Pawnee whammed the rifle butt joltingly against Quinn's chin.

Quinn fell back, his eyes glazed, and then before he could rise, Pawnee was over him, swinging the rifle stock at his head.

Dimly, Quinn jerked his head aside so

that the blow crashed against his shoulder, numbing his back, and then he managed to close again with Pawnee, freezing his fingers to the gun before Pawnee could smash out a second time.

ACROSS the room they threshed. The pain of Quinn's smashed shoulder numbed his fingers so that one hand slipped from the gun barrel. Unexpectedly, Pawnee let go of the rifle so that Quinn reeled back, crashing against the side of the table as he fell.

The rifle clattered across the floor, and before Quinn could rise. Pawnee drove forward, a knife slashing the amber light of the room. With his boot toe, Quinn kicked the table so that one of the legs caught the buckskin of Pawnee's leg, tripping him forward. As Pawnee fell, the knife blade drove into the dirt floor.

Desperately, Quinn jumped astraddle of the renegade's back, and before Pawnee could pull the knife from the stubborn ground, Quinn twisted at his neck, jerking back sharply so that there was a gasp of pain from Pawnee's throat.

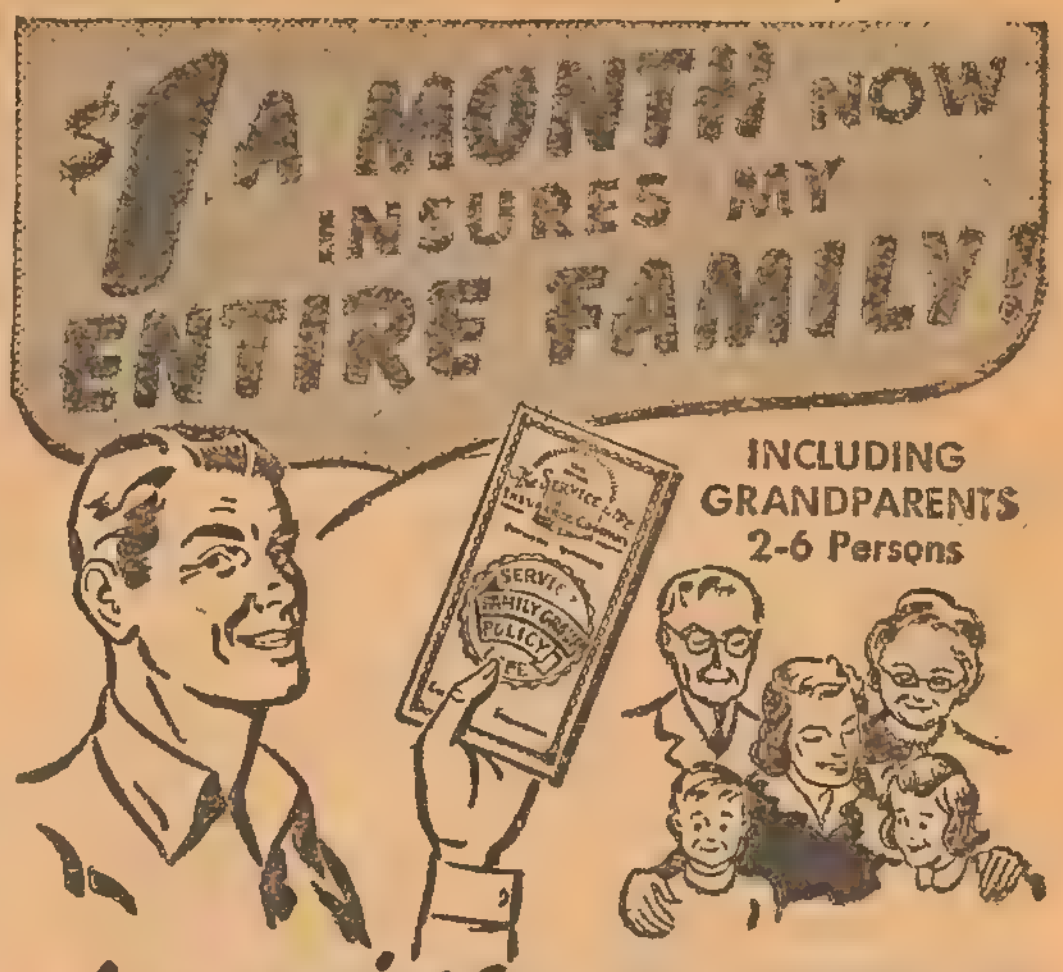
Pawnee's muscles momentarily went limp and Quinn staggered up, backing away toward the rifle across the room. Again Pawnee groped for the knife.

Quinn saw the blurred motion of Pawnee's arm and barely had time to duck aside as the blade imbedded itself in the wall. Pawnee charged forward just as Quinn's fingers closed over the rifle.

There was a gun's roar when Pawnee was close, and then Pawnee's slash-lipped mouth seemed almost to grin grotesquely as he crumpled slowly to the floor. With his boot toe, Quinn turned the way-station proprietor's body over. Even in death, Pawnee Pondrel's face had the same hard cruelty.

For more than an hour Quinn sat, nursing a slow circulation back into his smashed shoulder. There were clothes now, for the taking of them—and a horse outside to continue his journey—and yet something had gone out of it.

He looked down at Pawnee Pondrel again. Pawnee had wanted the Yankee



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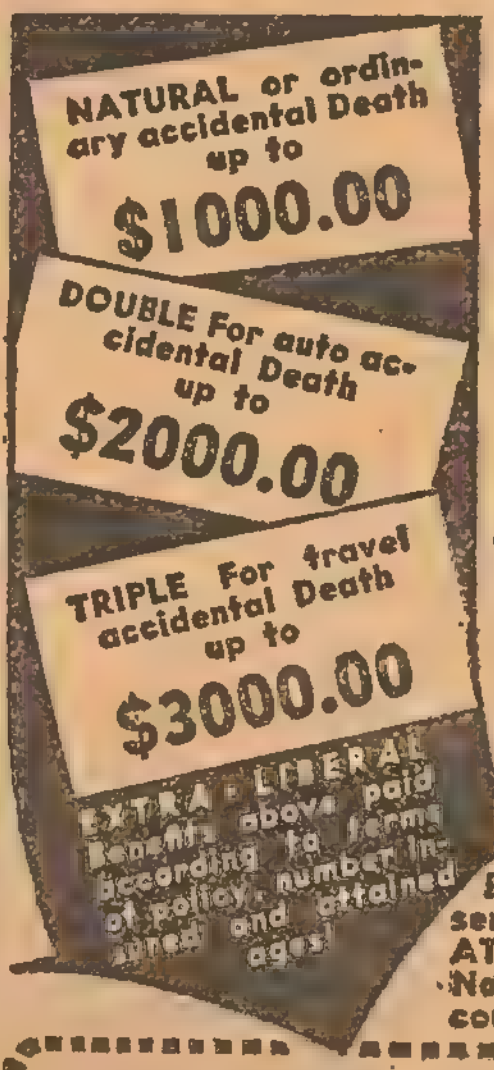
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outpost destroyed so the emigants would continue to patronize his way station, and Pawnee had used the only weapon that men of his kind knew—lies and treachery and the mass murder of innocent men.

WHEN Quinn left the way station, he was still wearing the hated Yankee blue, but when he had managed clumsily to saddle the horse, he headed north toward the Yankee outpost where Major Ambrose Amberly would be waiting.

For deserters, Quinn knew, there was the penalty of death—but for men there was something more important. The solemn responsibility of their promised word, no matter whether the time was peace or war.

When he faced Major Amberly in the outpost headquarters office, the stocky officer grunted.

"Sergeant Campbell has told us what you did to save the wagon train," Major Amberly said slowly. "How did you manage to determine who your friends were, and how did you manage to maneuver them into the lead?"

"There was no maneuvering needed," Quinn explained. "I figured that men leading other men into an ambush would let the victims go first. I watched while the freighters harnessed up. Some of them held back, watching their neighbors and waiting for them to swing into line. The unsuspecting ones paid attention only to getting their teams in harness and onto the trail as quickly as possible."

"A pretty logical conclusion," Amberly acknowledged.

"Human nature doesn't vary much, North or South," Quinn said.

Major Amberly turned in his chair, frowning suddenly.

"I'm going to take the authority of overlooking your effort to desert," he said bluntly. "The war between the states is over. You're free to go."

Quinn paused. During the long ride back to the outpost there had been time for thinking of many things.

"I'd like to re-enlist, sir," Quinn said softly.

Major Amberly surveyed him meditatively.

"There was a time when I would have liked to hear you say that," Major Amberly said. "I could have arranged a commission. I don't feel that I could do that under present circumstances."

"You have need for privates in your infantry ranks," Quinn said.

Major Amberly stared for a moment, and then he smiled.

"I wouldn't have expected a former Southern officer to accept a private's rank. Your enlistment will be accepted. Promotions will be granted as you earn them."

Quinn felt a tired easing of the tension within him, and then he looked down at the blue uniform that plated his body. The thing that he had first noticed on the prairie still held true. The thick gray dust lay against the creases of the blue, as though Confederate Gray had somehow merged with Yankee Blue—and the uniform of Ohio was the uniform of Georgia once more.

Pawnee Pondrel had said that he would earn the clothes he wore, but even Pawnee Pondrel hadn't known how true that promise was.

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WESTERN BRAIN-TWISTERS

By JAMES A. HINES

QUESTIONS

1. During branding time, are calves roped to the brander's fire by the head or the heels?
2. What noted gun-fighter is said to have killed more than thirty gunmen in fair individual fights, and every one of the men fell with a weapon in his hand?
3. What Western "bad man" had a great reputation as being a notorious desperado, but was not a desperado at all?
4. What person called himself "the last surviving member of the James-Younger gang?"
5. What noted gunfighter served as a constable when he was only nineteen years old?
6. When were the Texas Rangers organized?
7. What was Dick Yeager's ("Romeo of Oklahoma's outlaws") right name?
8. Can you name the members of the James-Younger gang, when they pulled the most sensational robbery of their career at Northfield, Minnesota, in 1876?
9. What was Wild Bill Hickok's ("King of Gun-fighters") right name?
10. Is there any difference between a rustie and a rustler?
11. They bet three to one in New Mexico that Billy the Kid would kill John Chisum, the Cattle King. Did he do this?
12. Who was the originator of the Wild West Show?
13. What famous Western outlaw's father was a Baptist minister?

(Continued on page 90)

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14. What famous gun-fighter gave up gun-fighting and went to New York to be an actor?
15. Can you name the most complete collection of Western lore, including information on lawmen and outlaws, in the United States? Where is the collection located?
16. How much is the "Salt War" said to have cost Texas?

ANSWERS ON PAGE 95

TOUGH HOMBRES DIE SUDDEN

A True Story of the Old West

By R. A. CRIDER

THE Wild West was tamed by 1890, so the history books say, but El Paso in 1895 was anything but tame. It submitted to a little scratching around the ears, but not to currying below the knees. Just across the Rio Grande was Juarez, the toughest town on the Mexican border. Bad men, killers, rustlers, smugglers, and border riff-raff milled from El Paso to Juarez, or vice versa, depending on how the Law was feeling at the moment. To keep some pretense of civilization, and some semblance of law and order, El Paso employed tough, straight-shooting marshals and constables.

Heading this list were Jeff Milton, George Scarborough, and John Selman. Scarborough and Selman were gunmen. Each was jealous of the other's reputation. All three had weathered the smoke of more than one gun battle.

The event that resulted in a quarrel between Selman and Scarborough, and eventually ended by the latter shooting Selman, and led to the departure of Scarborough by the gun-smoke trail, was the news that John Wesley Hardin was coming to town. Scarborough and Selman each contended that Hardin was his "meat." The argument rose to such heat that a gun battle was averted between these kings of the six-gun only by the interference of friends. At all events Har-

din's number was up with such a reception committee waiting for him. But he came on with two guns on his hips and a lawyer's shingle in his hand.

HARDIN'S two-gun career really began fifteen years after his birth in a little Texas town in the year 1853. His father, a Methodist circuit rider, named him John Wesley after the famous divine. Almost from birth, John Wesley proved what was in a name by taking exactly the opposite road intended by his well-meaning father.

Texas was a subjugated state after the Civil War, ruled mainly by carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Negroes. It was in the Texan blood to resent and fight against this rule. John Wesley, a boy of fifteen, did his part. He became embroiled with a Negro, took a licking from the fellow, went home and secured a pistol and proceeded to even up the score.

Notch No. 1 had thus come easy to John Wesley and pointed the way for the next few years. He went on the dodge to avoid reprisals from the Carpetbag Law; trapped and killed two officers and a Negro who took his trail. This made four notches in one year. In 1869 he killed another officer, and salivated a gambler in a dispute over a card game. The next year he got into a brawl at a celebration, killed one man and was forced to kill another before making his escape.

This type of warfare continued until John Wesley was bragging of twenty notches before he was twenty. In several of these engagements, Hardin had provoked the fight, or had shot when he was sure of his man, but in some it was shoot or be shot. He was learning that his hand was a little quicker and a little steadier than others when it came to a show-down. This was dangerous knowledge for any man in those days, especially John Wesley.

The Sutton-Taylor feud that rocked Texas for a generation and spread to the counties of Gonzales, Comanche, and DeWitt, appealed to Hardin's abilities and sympathies. Now a confirmed rider of

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the owl-hoot trail, he took up the banner of the Taylors and added a number of notches by gunning Sutton adherents.

In quiet periods, Hardin and a band of followers would cross the Rio Grande and "borrow" cows from the big *haciendas*. They swam the river, sometimes with vaqueros on their tails, and sold cattle at the prevailing price for "wet" cattle. When the vaqueros became too stubborn about relinquishing claim to their stock, the gang rustled cows from the Suttons and others of like or neutral sympathies. With the aid of brother Joe, a lawyer, faked bills of sale would be drawn so they could dispose of their cattle and still remain within the limits, if not within the spirit, of range law. Not that Hardin cared a lot, but it kept the sheriffs and Rangers off his trail. In and around Comanche he and his gang were the law as well as the outlaws. They took what they wanted and paid for it with hot lead.

HARDIN, like most gunmen sooner or later, began shooting the wrong men. Texans were a particular minded people. As long as outlaws and feudists shot each other, they looked on it as a sort of personal matter to be settled among themselves. But sheriff-shooting was a public affair. In 1873 Hardin filed a notch for Sheriff Jack Helms. The next year he shot Sheriff Charlie Webb while the latter was attempting to serve a warrant.

This shooting sent Hardin on the dodge with a reward for his scalp, on or off; and the killing so infuriated the people of Comanche that they rode out and hanged brother Joe to a mesquite. Wesley hid out in the mesquite thickets and prickly pear flats, slipping in occasionally to get supplies from the homes of sympathizers, and to gun those who had participated in the hanging of Joe.

The large reward tempted more and more gunmen and law officers to haunt his trail. Comanche became too hot for him, so he headed for other stomping grounds. The cowtowns offered a free and easy place to rest for a while—so he thought. Texas had sort of put a reward on the head of Wild Bill Hickok, Marshal of Abilene, for the gunning of some Texas cowboys. John Wesley rode up to have a look-see at the hell-roaring marshal and lead-slinger. Hickok met him and ordered him to "check" his guns, as there was something in a city ordinance to the effect that it was a high crime and misdemeanor to pack 'em in the city limits. Hardin hauled out his hardware and handed them to the famous marshal, held by the muzzles.

As Hickok reached for them, Hardin applied the Texas Spin, which he claimed to have discovered, and Wild Bill found himself looking into the deadliest shooting irons in the West. They immediately compromised: Hardin kept his guns, Wild Bill continued as marshal.

But the atmosphere around Wild Bill was none too healthful, reeking of Boot Hill. Hardin forked his horse and rode back to Texas. There he found that even though he still was not very popular, he was very much "wanted," and that there were a number of citizens, including the Rangers, who would like to get a good look at him over the sights of a six-gun. He changed his name, went to Florida and to Louisiana, and got into a number of scrapes, as could be expected of a man of his temperament. The Rangers trailed him hot and close and were able to spring a trap on him and, without firing a shot, capture the deadliest killer spawned by the West. He went back to Texas, aided and abetted by a grim Ranger, and stood trial for the shooting of Webb. The sentence was twenty-five years at the Huntsville state prison—less than a year per victim.

Hardin earned the reputation of being a hard prisoner to handle, as might be expected. It probably took frequent applications of the "cat," then in vogue, to reform him. But he became a model prisoner, studied law during his spare time, and is reputed to have taught Sunday School classes.

Maybe he was looking ahead, for he was pardoned in 1894 by Governor Hogg. Now forty-one years of age, Hardin selected El Paso as a likely place to hang

out his shingle and begin life over again. He buckled on his guns and, with his reputation to back him up, began the practice of law.

EL PASO had a tough enough reputation without John Wesley, the lawyer and ex-gunman, to complicate it. Neither Selman nor Milton was the man to back down when there was tough going ahead. Selman had won his spurs in the hey-day of the Lincoln County War and carried a dozen notches as a sort of certificate. After his arrival in El Paso, a few powdersmoke controversies had done nothing to dim his reputation. Milton was a cool, efficient peace-officer of unquestioned courage and integrity. The marshals, constables, and police officers armed themselves for battle.

The call of the old life was still upon Hardin. At night, in his room at the Herndon rooming house, he spent hours drawing and snapping his guns, and practicing the old Texas Spin. He still figured that he might need something to back up his early reputation. And well he might, for John Selman, Jeff Milton, J. C. Jones, George Scarborough, and Selman Jr. kept a close eye on him.

Hardin formed an attachment for a lady of some reputation in Juarez, and took on the support and championing of her cause in El Paso. While he was absent, Selman Jr. was forced to arrest her for disturbing the peace.

When Hardin returned, he took up the matter with the elder Selman. They met at seven o'clock p. m. August 19, 1895, in front of the Acme Saloon. Hardin opened the conversation:

"You've got a son that's a cowardly —— ——! He pulled my woman when I was absent and robbed her of fifty dollars."

Selman edged in on the powwow about there. "Hardin, there's no man on earth that can talk about my children like that without fighting!"

"I am unarmed," Hardin said.

"Go get your gun. I'm armed!" Selman threw in his face.

Hardin then told him: "I'll go and get

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a gun and when I meet you I'll meet you smoking!" After delivering the edict he went on into the Acme.

When two kings of the six-gun trail make fighting talk, they know, better than those not wise in the ways of gunmen, that one, maybe both, will die *pronto* with boots on—or the gun-slinging world will forever after hold them as men of little worth. Time must have hung heavily, and nerves must have been strained, if men of such reputation still had nerves, as they waited for the showdown.

About eleven o'clock, E. L. Shackelford met Selman and asked him to go in and have a drink. Hardin and Henry Brown were at the bar shaking dice, Hardin keeping watch over all newcomers through the bar mirror. Selman and Shackelford settled down to a drink, the former also watching Hardin in the mirror. Selman claimed he saw, or thought he saw, Hardin reach for his gun and fired just as Hardin said, "Four sixes to beat."

Selman shot him through the head, as he later testified, because he had heard that the gunman was wearing a steel vest. He shot him three more times and probably would have emptied his gun had not young Selman run up and stopped him. Henry Brown, who had been playing with Hardin, high-tailed it by the back door when the shooting started.

Hardin was as dead as he ever would be and he still had his boots on. Selman, from the standpoint of law and order, had eliminated a human "rattler." He was acquitted in the hearing. But his reputation had soared to new heights. Scarborough cut him down in a gun-fight the next year. A short time later Scarborough played out his string and died in his

"According to this divining rod, the only gold around here is in my teeth."

"rawhides." Selman Jr. became a writer and died with his boots on. Jeff Milton, never a gun-fighter, but a square-shooting peace officer, is still living, bearing an enviable reputation as a bringer of law and order to the hell-roaring Southwest.

Answers to Western Brain-Twisters

(Continued from page 89)

1. Back in the old days a roper would "heel" a calf and drag it to the branding fire. Later it became the rule to make a "head" catch and then haze the animal to the fire. Ranchers discovered that "heeling" often caused permanent injury.
2. Wild Bill Hickok.
3. Joseph Slade. The legend persists to this day that Slade killed more than fifty men in his career, and as many as six men in one evening. But the truth is that Slade killed only one man, a French horse-thief known as Jules Reni .
4. Bill Stiles.
5. Wild Bill Hickok.
6. The Texas Rangers were organized in 1835.
7. Ellsworth Wyatt.
8. This expedition was undertaken by Jesse and Frank James, Cole and Bob Younger, Bill Stiles, Charley Pitts and Clel Miller.
9. James Butler Hickok.
10. Yes. A rustie is an animal of slight value. A rustler is a cattle thief.
11. No. John Chisum died of cancer at Eureka Springs, Missouri, in 1884.
12. Wild Bill Hickok.
13. The father of Jesse and Frank James.
14. Wild Bill Hickok.
15. The A. H. Rose collection in San Antonio, Texas.
16. About $31,000,000.

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A GOLD-TONE STATUETTE transforms that picture of baby, that snapshot of your sweetheart, mother, father, sister, brother or friend—even the family pet—into an almost-living image. Mounted on tempered Masonite with a hardwood base, a GOLD-TONE STATUETTE stands charmingly by itself on your table, radio or dresser. It gives you a truly companionable "small-edition" of a dear one you want with you always. And it's all so easy to get! You simply send us your photo, snapshot or negative and we carefully reproduce it by our new GOLD-TONE Photographic Process. Then, after mounting the reproduction on its life-like cut-out, we ship it immediately for you to enjoy and cherish forever.

SPECIAL! STATUETTES IN COLOR

Yes, you can have and enjoy your GOLD-TONE STATUETTE in full, natural color, too! For only one dollar extra, our skilled portrait artists will carefully color your statuette in rich oil tints. Statuettes in color become so "real" you almost expect them to walk!

Your Photo Returned in Perfect Condition

Any negative, or photograph you send us, we will return promptly in perfect condition. Send any subject: full length or bust size, individuals or groups. So hurry and fill out the coupon while our special introductory price is still in effect. When you actually see these GOLD-TONE STATUETTES you'll wonder why you ever did without the rich, warm, "almost-living" daily companionship they bring you to enjoy. It's the perfect gift! And the perfect tribute to loved ones no longer with you, whose memory means more than an ordinary photograph can signify.

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Enclosed find $_____ Ship Postpaid

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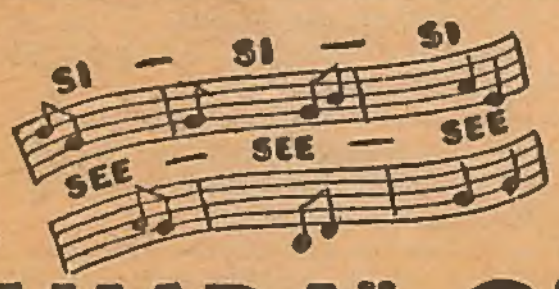

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CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing total checked above. Send my sets POSTPAID.

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